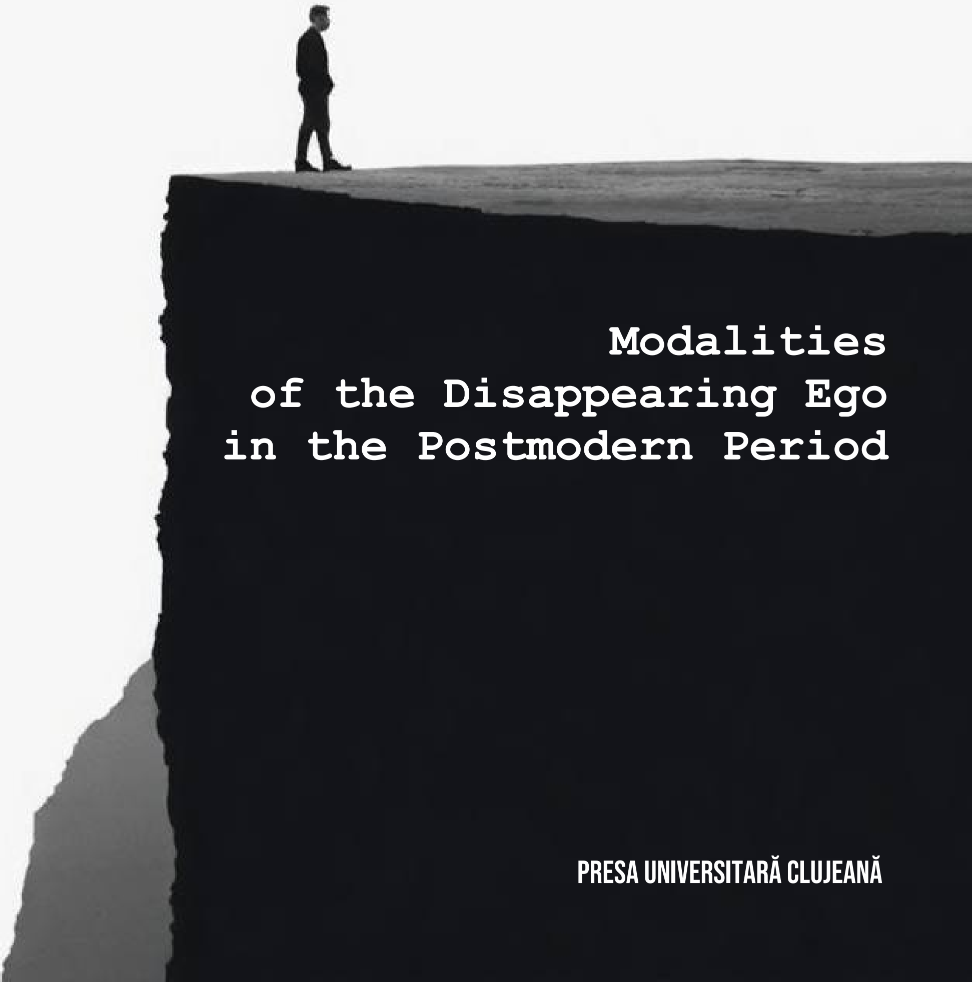
ATTILA KOVÁCS

IN SEARCH OF THE SELF



Modalities of the Disappearing Ego in the Postmodern Period

PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ

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The Philosopher, the Goat, and the Cabbage: Introduction

Philosophy emerged from an inherent aspiration – regardless of whether philosophers themselves have acknowledged this throughout history or not – to both feed the goat and preserve the cabbage. In other words, the central question is this: how can we live and experience our lives in such a way that we also preserve them?

What is the essence of this preservation? Philosophy transforms my inherently human effort to preserve my life into the thematisation of the essence of my life. More precisely: our effort to preserve our lives, and the thematisation of this effort, is inseparable from the following questions: what is it that constitutes me in a substantial, metaphysical sense? Does a "hard core" exist within me, in a substantialist/essentialist sense, that I can claim as my own, inalienably and inseparably?

"And he circled with watchful eye the sacrificial altar, where flickered the pure, chaste flame of his love; knelt before it and tended and cherished it in every way, because he so wanted to be faithful. And in a little while, unobservably, without sensation or stir, it went out after all. But Tonio Kröger still stood before the cold altar, full of regret and dismay at the fact that faithfulness was impossible upon this

earth. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went his way."[1] In the lines quoted from Thomas Mann, something similar is at play to what Lewis Carroll so aptly expressed in *Alice in Wonderland*, a work frequently cited by contemporary philosophers: "'I've often seen a cat without a grin', thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!'."[2]

In fact, this "grin" is what philosophers have been searching for over millennia. Moreover, it now seems that quantum physics has also arrived at this grin. For the deeper physics delves into the nucleus of the atom, the more the matter itself – understood in the solid, substantialist/ essentialist sense – disappears, leaving almost nothing, or, in truth, Nothing remains. The Cat disappears, but its grin lingers…

Our question, essentially, is this: does at least some kind of "grin" exist in the case of the subject, one that would express its selfhood? As this volume reveals, the question is exceedingly complex. No matter the perspective from which we approach it, one thing is certain: in a substantialist sense, the "Cat" disappears. And in what form the smile remains, if it remains at all – this is the subject of this book, which brings together my studies published over the years in various scholarly journals in Hungarian, English, and Romanian, now revised and presented in a unified structure.

In the following chapters, I will examine the question of selfhood in relation to objecthood/technology, consumption/

1 Mann: *Tonio Kröger*, p. 24.
2 Carroll: *Alice Csodaországban*, p. 67.

insatiability, the other/otherness, sensations/corporeality, and normality/abnormality. My theoretical aim is to demonstrate that our selfhood, understood in a substantialist sense, dissolves – or, more precisely, "flows into" – everything with which it relates: it can be absorbed into objecthood through technology and submerged in consumption or the Other. In the case of the body, it becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain where the boundaries lie, and the relationship between normality and abnormality is also re-evaluated.

But what ultimately remains – does anything remain – of the "cabbage" after the analysis has systematically peeled away its leaves?

1. A Lesson on Totalitarianism: The Postmodern Dominance of Technology and Production

The technical sphere and totalitarianism appear to be two completely distinct phenomena in our world, seemingly unrelated to one another. Traditional treatments of these two categories do not take into account that there may be a connection between technology –bound to the practical side of life and instrumentality – and the politically defined category of totalitarianism. This introductory chapter aims to clarify the relationship between the two. It begins with the premise that totalitarianism, which is inherent to modernity, derives its meaning and significance not only from its often-discussed political-philosophical dimensions but also from its cultural connotations, which stem from its relationship with the exclusivity of technical hegemony.

I argue that technical dominance – beyond being conceptualised through the characteristics of totalitarian systems – constitutes a particular formation of totalitarianism, the understanding of which would shed deeper light on its essence. Furthermore, the democratic gestures of consumption cannot be separated from the problematic nature of technical totalitarianism. The questions posed by the society of hyperconsumption can be more effectively clarified through

the categorisation of totalitarianism in the context of our current technological relations, particularly when we confront the lessons drawn from its most recent – and hopefully last – comprehensive occurrence. Therefore, the most instructive lesson of totalitarianism can be derived from the free human insight into technical domination, as well as from the control of the unprincipledness in production and consumption through the rationality of existentialism.

We can conceive of modernity as the dominance of the technical sphere. While this approach does not exhaust its essence, nor does it illuminate even a representative aspect of it, it hopefully brings us closer to the core of its cultural transformations. From my perspective, the fundamental disposition of modernity is thought-provokingly linked to the instrumental-technical potential of *homo faber*, whose essence and mode of existence depend on technology in several respects. Just as Marx argued that the social structure is determined by the development and applicability of productive forces, I contend that an individual's historical consciousness, dignity, and sense of freedom are conditioned by the prevailing technical possibilities.

The paradigm of modernity can be derived from Descartes' assertion that, due to man's superior cognitive abilities, he is the "master and possessor" of the world and nature. The rationalist followers of the French philosopher reinforced this Cartesian hypothesis. Kant pushed the boundaries of knowledge, confronting the knowing consciousness with the ultimate limits of the phenomenal world, while Hegel attributed the truly significant forms of

consciousness to the activity of the absolute spirit. All of this points to the cult of reason surrounding the modern individual, the hypothesis of the world's dominion through rationality, and its intellectual hegemony. On one hand, it represents an aggressive intellectual disposition, placing everything before the tribunal of reason and aiming for a rational appropriation of reality. On the other hand, it reflects a kind of naïveté characteristic of armchair philosophers, failing to take into account the non-rational determinants of the human condition, such as those exerted by the technical sphere.

Humanity only began to realise its historical vulnerability when the epistemic authority of the subject wavered, and, following Nietzsche's radical critique, it was dislodged from that proud centre in which it had understood itself to reside. In the era of late modernity – borrowing Vattimo's metaphor – the ideas of modernity began to "weaken". In the wake of this loss of control, individuals became aware that they are no more than playthings of history, technology, and power. The characteristic discourses of modernity, centred on the autonomy of reason, have been replaced by the writings of postmodern thinkers (Vattimo, Rorty, Deleuze), which focus on vulnerability, the ethics of weakness, and irony. At the same time, there are also studies concerning alienation, the threats posed by technological power, and the crisis of values (as seen in the works of Heidegger, Marcuse, and Habermas). Reflections on the cultural fate of technology emerge at the intersection of these thematic explorations.

In Heidegger's view, the vulnerability experienced in the technological world is a consequence of a philosophical tradition marked by forgetfulness of Being. The human being, who has forgotten their situation, the boundaries of their existence, and their mortality, is only now beginning to realise that the values they once believed to possess have actually been lost. Through this loss of Being, the individual can now experience their existential limitations (for example, through the inability to control technology) and recognise that deeper, more primordial forces prevail over them.

In his work *Les années 30 sont devant nous*, Gérard Granel articulates the problems of modernity from an Aristotelian standpoint: "modernity is the first and unique ideological system in history in which the meaning of ideality is defined through the concept of boundlessness". Since in existentialist insight *essentia* is equated with *possibilitas*, Granel does not stop at the conventional definition of modernity but rather demonstrates how future-defining possibilities can arise from its essential structure. In his reasoning, Granel roughly applies Sartre's idea of human essence following existence, as well as the ontological logic of *Dasein*, which is shaped by its future. We must understand our present – but this can only be done by acknowledging how future events play into the conditions of the present moment. One of the most significant future elements that defines our current identity lies in the possibilities offered by technology.

It is a common belief that the horrors of fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism represent exceptional lessons of history, which the subsequent democratic world order has definitively

acknowledged, drawing all possible conclusions. However, according to Granel, this historical perspective is inadequate. With the phrase "the 1930s are ahead of us", he suggests that we have not definitively escaped the terror of totalitarianism, as our future may still hold significant threats in the form of unseen powers.

The structure of the novel totalitarianism emerging in the form of technology presupposes an understanding of the lessons drawn from the dictatorial events of our shared past. Similar to Granel, we could argue that these events were neither exceptional nor random, as they belong to the very essence of modernity. Our modern era is incapable of existing without some form of authority-centred dominance.[1] Moreover, the factors that shape the zeitgeist are intrinsic to the essence of modernity, making it incorrect to label them as foreign, "horrific", and alien to our own nature.

The 1930s in Europe favoured the rise of three great powers. The three defining events were the consolidation of fascist power in Italy, the ascendancy of National Socialism in Germany, and the establishment of Stalin's anonymous, bureaucratic system in Russia. In all three states, the sudden onset of totalitarianism replaced a relatively acceptable form of democracy. According to Granel, the rapid nature of this regime change and the ease with which the principles of freedom were abandoned is at the very least thought-provoking.

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[1] The postmodern phenomenon of technical domination provides a strong argument that, while certain elements of modernity are indispensable in our present, the essence of postmodernity is not alien to that of modernity; rather, it can be seen as a consequence of it.

The possible explanation for the regime change was provided by Simone Weil and Franz Neumann, who interpreted the reasons for the shift in system and perspective within the context of industrialisation. Both of these dictatorial political regimes emerged somewhat in line with the technical requirements of the era, aiming to regulate the obstacles to the technicisation of production and bureaucratic management. Thus, behind totalitarian policies, we can observe a certain degree of unifying tendency. The accelerated, mechanised production conditions, the excessively bureaucratic management of institutions, and the state authority's interference in employment relations gradually seemed to require the activation of a "universal" oversight mechanism. According to this view, behind the totalitarian terror –beyond the often-debated nationalist motivations – lie economic and technical factors. Marx's position, which subordinates the entire political structure to economic relations, has been reaffirmed. Granel warns that the essence of this operational mechanism remains unchanged to this day.

To substantiate his viewpoint, he analyses the concept of "work". Modernity has eliminated the character of work as merely instrumental, subordinated to the rationality of utility, transforming it into a genuine act of shaping reality. As a result of significant reductions in production costs and the development of efficient mass production, work ceases to be a factor that satisfies everyday necessities and becomes a tool for shaping the surrounding world. Human production gradually stamped its mark on everything, rendering the natural almost unrecognisable compared to the artificial. This resulted in the

emergence of a simulacrum world, where the human hand reproduced the natural and the original with such realism that it competes with the "genuine" in terms of its value as reality. This, of course, leads to a change in ontological boundaries and the formation of a new, artificial world.

The nature of this new, artificial world is perhaps best reflected in the theory of technological singularity: "An analysis of the history of technology shows that technological change is exponential, contrary to the common-sense 'intuitive linear' view. So we won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century – it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today's rate). The 'returns', such as chip speed and cost-effectiveness, also increase exponentially. There's even exponential growth in the rate of exponential growth. Within a few decades, machine intelligence will surpass human intelligence, leading to the Singularity – technological change so rapid and profound it represents a rupture in the fabric of human history. The implications include the merger of biological and nonbiological intelligence, immortal software-based humans, and ultra-high levels of intelligence that expand outward in the universe at the speed of light."[2]

The attachment of modern society to the produced existence and the self-definition through possessed things can be attributed to the consequences of the characteristic paradigms of modernity. Even Descartes carried out the replacement of the nature of things with a methodically developed fictional narrative, positioning humanity within the

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[2] Kurzweil: *The Law of Accelerating Returns*, p. 381.

artificial world of discursive logic and artefacts. This marks the first turning point in our Western culture from the natural to the artificial. Baudrillard aptly notes that in the world of simulacra, knowledge presents a reality that is the result of the infinite enterprise of theoretical *simulation*.[3] If the narratives about the state of the world focus on the problems of production and manufacturability, we can argue, contrary to Lyotard, that the time of metanarratives is not yet over, since the many small narratives form part of a broader problematic that revolves around production and technology. Behind every theoretical and practical endeavour lie perspectives concerning the necessity, functionality, and limits of the technical reality.

Regarding the ontology of production, Granel writes that we can formulate both an existential and a categorical definition of work.[4] In the existential sense, work is a process that serves the conditions of existence, which – as we have seen – has become pragmatically obsolete due to technical possibilities. However, the categorical approach is more suited to capturing the ontological relevance of production. This approach primarily entails a theoretical description, while the existential definition of production stems from the cumulative empirical insights of everyday economic transactions.

The phenomenology of the existential aspect of production can be found in Baudrillard. Since production is dependent on demand and consumption, existential relations

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[3] Baudrillard: *Pour une critique de leconomie politique de signes*.

[4] In our case, the ontological status of work in itself is incidental; however, it is noteworthy as an element of the self-organising nature of technology.

– such as levels of need and fashion – are significantly influenced. At this point, we arrive at the phenomenon of consumption, which absolutely characterises the current zeitgeist. The phenomenology of consumption as a postmodern phenomenon could be the subject of an entire monograph, so here we will limit ourselves to the most essential remarks necessary for our argument.

As soon as consumption in our society distanced itself from its existential role and became increasingly a quantifiable status symbol rather than a means of fulfilling basic needs, its ontological relevance can no longer be assessed by classical standards. Baudrillard is right to draw our attention to the fact that needs cease to function as consumer forces generated by a society of affluence and instead operate as productive forces that drive the production mechanism forward.[5] At this point, we encounter the so-called consumer society, where consumption for its own sake becomes a condition of existence. This state is most aptly characterised by the slogan "you are what you consume". The issue of consumption as an identity-defining problem in the postmodern era belongs to a different chapter than the current question of technological dominance, yet the two are interdependent phenomena. Unprincipled consumption would never have become identity-defining if pleasure goods were not made accessible

[5] This statement captures our society, which has fallen victim to marketing strategies, most effectively. While the economy once focused on meeting natural needs, today's advertisements strive to instil ever-new artificial and unnatural demands that consumers can perceive not only as natural necessities but also as symbols of social belonging.

through the technical boom that continually maximises production efficiency. This often did not appear on its own but entered the private sphere almost imperceptibly, disguised as the pleasure of consumption, thereby questioning the boundaries of free decision-making and privacy. We are referring here to advertising tactics that present certain products as the ultimate reality. In the absence of possessing these items, an individual becomes lost, while having access to them also grants the privilege of exclusivity. The violent intrusion of the technical sphere into the sovereignty of the private sphere creates a schizophrenic society, whose value judgments are incapable of distinguishing between appearance and reality and treating things according to their actual ontological weight.

We can see, therefore, that needs become independent of an individual's existential condition, entering the realm of the *system*. We can observe an infinite feedback loop through which the media endlessly varies the needs. Production no longer has a counterpart in the sphere of human needs. Following Baudrillard, we can say that natural elemental needs are transformed into pseudo-needs by well-conceived media strategies devised by psychologists, ensuring their long-term persistence.[6] If Rousseau's dream were to come true and we were to "return to nature" *en masse*, the economic mechanism would collapse. Much of the energy of the artificially sustained technical reality must be directed towards developing immunisation strategies that allow it to sustain

[6] The recent economic crisis vividly illustrates the unstable ontological foundations of the politics of artificial needs.

itself in the face of threats from reality posed by nature. Behind the dominance of technology lies a barely perceptible conflict between the real and the simulacrum. This leads to a schizophrenic culture, best reflected in a series of fragmented images that flash and alternate with one another. We can observe how technology consolidates its functionality through its own tools.

The artificial needs created and sustained by the media are indispensable factors in our global world. In this case, production cannot be regionalised or controlled according to particular objectives, as it becomes part of a macrostructural process that transcends the globe. It forms a totalitarian system, aptly characterised by the concept of "world trade".

Production characterised by totalitarian tendencies fragments the world into unified yet independent – and indeed contradictory – economic regions that compete against one another. The earliest observations regarding global division originate from Heidegger in the 1950s, who attributed the decline of thought and *poiesis* to the polarization of the world manifested in the two superpowers of that era.

In our postmodern era, technical enterprises – according to Granel's interpretation –lead production to the point where it "devours all boundaries, both internal and external".[7] The production that has moved beyond the scope of verifiability manifests itself in the boundless shift towards the infinite, as it can only exist if it encompasses the terror of totality. The uniqueness of the totalitarianism promised in the guise of

[7] Granel: op. cit., p. 83.

technology lies in its claim to the dominance of the great Whole, the totality. This, however, lies beyond the realm of verifiability. The polarization of the world highlighted by Heidegger in no way contradicts this fact. The essence of totalitarianism inherently involves self-assertion through self-differentiation from the Other. A particular shade of technological terror can only strengthen if there exists at least one similarly powerful technological force in the world, against which it can position itself as a competitor.[8] We have once again arrived at the idea of technical dominance. If political totalitarianism is opposed by the principle of freedom, the opposite of technical terror is a competing technical terror that serves different interests at most and can only constitute an opponent to the former on an economic level, but essentially excludes any exemption from technical presence.

Some philosophers – such as Richard Rorty – have advanced the interpretation of totalitarianism's presence in the free world. They emphasise that our existential culture, which places needs beyond the boundaries of normality, is, in fact, an expression of the fanaticism that is only a short step away from totalitarianism. From the reality of unprincipled consumption, Rorty arrives at the following disjunction: either

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[8] This explains the distancing of American hegemony from other great powers (the Soviet Union, the European Union, China), without which its expansion would become meaningless. Similarly, totalitarian policies assert their programmes through opposition to contrasting ideologies; we cannot speak of a dictatorship if democracy does not exist.

culture or democracy.[9] Furthermore, we can see – no matter how paradoxical it may seem – that democracy cannot flourish unless it encompasses some form of totalitarianism. Thus, the disjunction of "culture or democracy" becomes irrelevant, as it transforms into a conjunction of "totalitarian culture and totalitarian democracy". Ultimately, the issue hinges on the coercive nature of production and the technical intervention in the sphere of privacy.

Granel evaluates the transformation of democratic technical dominance into murderous intolerance as follows: "When everything becomes an object, there is no longer a natural object for the subject; there is no longer an irreducible object, only a network – a vast network of instrumental and energetically interchangeable relationships, where human beings, place, and time are consumed. We should not speak of objectivity, but rather of objectness."[10] This uncontrollable and oppressive objectness, against which humans are powerless because they are no longer its masters, may explain the totalitarian demand expressed in the neurotic process, suggesting that the 1930s may indeed lie before us. Objectness signifies nothing other than a world stripped of its metaphysical meaning, characterised by the "indeterminacy, infinity, and boundlessness" of production.[11]

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[9] The disjunction is not necessarily based on the opposition of the two categories, but rather on the totalitarian nature of the consumption-centric aspect of democracy.

[10] Haar: *Heidegger et l'essence de l'homme*, p. 132.

[11] Tassin: *Un monde acosmique?*, p. 233.

At this point, we have reached the final conclusion of this section: the form of production manifested as the drive "to keep everything under control" is nothing other than totalitarianism, which we all believed to be one of history's exceptional, dark chapters, and from which we had definitively freed ourselves with the advent of democratic principles.

1.1. The Metaphysical Aspects of *Techne*

When addressing the philosophical problematic of production, we must not forget its original Aristotelian meaning. Philosophers and historians who derive the paradigmatic categories of Western civilization from the Hellenic tradition particularly enjoy referencing Aristotle's concept of *techne*. According to them, the European productive subject exists in an ontologically well-defined relationship with the external world during the production process. It is no coincidence that Heidegger devoted significant attention to the analysis of *techne* when interpreting historical subjectivity metaphysically. This concept – beyond its mere instrumental, operational, and productive connotations – refers back to the ontological situation of the European individual when considered alongside the notions of *polis*, *physis*, and *aletheia*. Therefore, a fundamental relationship between humanity and the world is reflected in the original Aristotelian problem of production.

The subsequent focal points of the chapter concentrate on the analysis of the ancient problem of *techne*. First, we will

review the fundamental characteristics of the Aristotelian concept of *techne*, and then we will compare it with the economically oriented circumstances of production in contemporary terms. The ultimate goal of our line of reasoning is to identify the transformations that subjectivity has undergone within the context of postmodern production relations. Our starting hypothesis is that there is a significant difference between the subjectivity functioning within ancient production relations and that of contemporary interest-driven and profit-oriented economic relations, which affect the representation of their own essence.[12]

In dictionary definitions, the term *techne* signifies "procedure", "skill", "art", and "applied science".[13] The term's first appearance in Plato does not have a precisely defined meaning. Based on its approximate, practical application, it referred to various forms of non-specialised skills, manual dexterity, and professional competence. In *The Republic*, *The Sophist*, and *The Statesman*, Plato applies the term quite aptly to productive arts, establishing a problematics where *techne* and *poietike* are mutually presupposed. The former is closer to practical arts, reflecting the manifestations aimed at producing things through practical skills, in imitation of the archetypal creative actions of the gods.

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12 A similar evaluation can be found in Marx, but with a shift in emphasis. Marx inferred solely social and economic functionality from the development of production means and relations, and he did not extend the issue of human alienation beyond the economic sphere. In contrast, our current line of thought refers to the ontological – thus more fundamental – impacts suffered by subjectivity.

13 See Peters: *Termenii filosofiei greceşti*, p. 267 et passim.

From these few thoughts, it becomes evident that the ancient concept of *techne* unfolds within a metaphysical horizon defined by human nature, human and divine creation, the things to be worked on, and one's place in the world. Aristotle's concept of *techne* is "more technical" and "modern", yet it still retains the ontological framework inherited from his predecessors.

Aristotle's *techne* is a component of the inherent, habitual pursuits of humans. Its aim is production rather than action. Therefore, it is not related to the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that expresses "the knowledge of good and evil". It is based on lessons drawn from specific cases and inductive knowledge. It signifies comprehensive skill, as its formation is realised through the general knowledge created during the generalisation of specific instances and the understanding of causes. While the experienced individual possesses knowledge of "how" but lacks understanding of "why",[14] the individual practising *techne* is a master of both. It is unnecessary to elaborate that, in this sense, the "technician" corresponds to the wise person from the first book of *Metaphysics*. *Techne* encompasses comprehensive skill, a global competence covering particular cases, and, above all, teachable knowledge. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that *techne* is under the authority of logos to reinforce its theoretical relevance – albeit, it pertains to the realm of empirical beings rather than to being itself.

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[14] Heidegger: *Întrebare privitoare la tehnică*, p. 138.

Heidegger provides a valuable etymological interpretation of the ancient functionality of *techne* in his essay *The Question Concerning Technology*. Here, he understands technology simply as a modality of bringing forth from concealment. In his formal statement: "Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *aletheia*, truth, happens." In discussing the essence of technology, Heidegger recalls the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of creation.

In the context of the ontological positioning of instrumentality, Heidegger notes that the tool-like nature of readily available items is by no means self-evident. If the essence of a tool unfolds within the realm of causality, then the produced object is created from something, thanks to someone's expertise, and intended for a specific purpose. The *telos* of the object is directly responsible for its tool-like nature and its purpose. We can see that the causal *topoi* of Aristotelian metaphysics remain inextricable from the phenomenon of production to this day. The *causa materialis* is responsible for the material nature of the tool, the *causa formalis* refers to the form of the material, the *causa finalis* indicates the usability and suitability of the tool to be produced, while the *causa efficiens* denotes the productive intervention of the creative subject. Without the latter, the material would not take on the form required by usability. The efficient cause is essentially the result of the creative productive intervention, which, through the synthesis of these factors and causes, creates and produces. In this sense, production is the gradual and systematic adjustment of the instrumental value of things, considered

ontologically, to the requirements of usability. The material, formal, and final causes, in themselves, would be baseless and would never result in a usable object without the active engagement of the craftsman. At this point, we have reached the essence of the ontological structure of production. Production involves the thoughtful, controlled, and directed gathering of being, making it visible, and rendering originally formless matter usable. Thus, the ancient concept of production establishes an original ontological relationship among the four causes that define instrumentality. The final cause, or efficient cause, is nothing other than production itself – as Heidegger also emphasised.[15]

The question now is to what extent the Greek concept of tool-like productivity retains its significance in a world of technicality subordinated to pragmatism. We shall seek to illuminate the relationship between modern technical conditions and the original concept of *techne*, drawing on Heidegger's pertinent insights.

For post-Heideggerian thinkers, a starting point is the late understanding of one of the last metaphysicians concerning *homo humanus*,[16] the historical transformations of subjectivity, and the alienation of humanity resulting from the

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[15] Ibid., p. 131–135.

[16] A detailed understanding of this problem is significantly enhanced by a chapter from my doctoral dissertation, which addresses the detachment of modern subjectivity from the centre of existence. In my analysis, the alienation resulting from the historical functional changes of *techne* represents such a comprehensive Heideggerian question that a meaningful discussion would necessitate a complete interpretation of his metaphysics concerning the Greeks. However, in this instance, we shall be content with the benefits of the simplicity of decontextualisation.

departure from ancient Greek roots. Today, man is no longer an autonomous subject at the centre of production processes; rather, he is an organic part of a network, having unintentionally and unconsciously relinquished his ontological dignity. The modifications in the manifestation of *techne* concerning the functionality of modern production can be succinctly articulated through a Heideggerian lens by asserting that Greek *techne* was viewed as an autonomous creative event, grounded in its ontological authority, which fully utilised the creator's creativity and enriched their artistic individuality. The modern production process is a link in a chain of closely interconnected pragmatist relations. These relations have a levelling effect from which the productive subjectivity is not exempt. While the Greek producer enjoyed an ontological exteriority in relation to the object and process of production, the postmodern producer is reduced to a mere available automaton by the logistical solutions that permeate the entire world.

From the outset, antique technicity engaged both the producer and the product at a different level. During the creative process, these two elemental poles of production did not undergo fundamental, metaphysical changes. Instead, their phenomenal surfaces became more prominent. I could also put it this way: *techne* bestowed dignity upon the object, which became more valuable and usable through human craftsmanship, while the creator, in turn, attained their authentic closeness to nature precisely through the act of crafting.[17]

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[17] Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh in *The Origin of the Work of Art* excellently captures the original essence of *techne*. A seemingly trivial

While ancient production processes were primarily moments of an autonomous act of creation, current production enterprises have become subordinate elements of global structures that permeate the world. Heidegger captured most sensitively the overwhelming nature of postmodern universalism, exacerbated by the rampant impact of technology. His position remains influential to this day, not only through his late metaphysical observations but also through his first systematic critique of the subjugating authority of technological events. For Heidegger, production, understood as a mode of creation, is a manifestation of the historicity of the human dimension and an event of the self-revelation of the truth of being, taking sensory form in the creation itself. My next thoughts focus on illuminating Heidegger's interpretation of the essence of technology and the issues surrounding the uprooting and vulnerability of human essence under the dominance of technology. With this, I aim to approach the contemporary problem of production strategies and the universality of technical expansion in our postmodern world.

Heidegger's perhaps most original and thought-provoking assertion regarding technology is that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological". The essence of technology is not found in specific production

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painting of a peasant's wooden shoes vividly conveys the relationship between the German farmer and nature, as well as the ontological status of humanity rooted in *physis*. What Heidegger refers to as the reliability of the tool is nothing other than the quality of being that is grasped in the artwork as a preserved revealing.

processes but in the ontological relations that illuminate the "why" and the "how". Authentic production is always more than the producer's influence on the produced tool and the subsequent application of functional tools; we are confronted with a multifaceted mode of existence that can be characterised by Aristotelian causal categories. However, while we can aptly interpret traditional production processes using Aristotelian causal categories, contemporary production retains little of its original functionality and purpose. Heidegger does not thematise production as such, but he repeatedly directs his attention to the metaphysically broader and more interpretable phenomenon of technology. While the metaphysics of the essence of technology does not fall within the central focus of the current chapter, it cannot be overlooked as a dominant phenomenon that encompasses and clearly defines the ontology of production.

In Heidegger's view, technology is a phenomenon that fundamentally defines the destiny of the 20th century. Due to its hegemony, it exerts a substitutive effect; it replaces the earlier relationship between humanity and nature, as well as the relationship between the material to be worked, the creator, and the creation, with a uniform relation. Of course, a distinction must be made between classical and modern technical phenomena. Virtually every tool is technical, serving a tangible human purpose, resulting from prior consideration, and stemming from a production structure. However, we can discern a fundamental difference between tools created as a result of traditional craftsmanship and products manufactured by electric motors. In his writings published in the 1950s and

1960s,[18] Heidegger emphasised the functional differences between tools based on traditional technological solutions that operate – one might say – freely in natural conditions and modern devices powered or controlled electrically. Thus, the wooden bridge connecting the banks of the rural stream and the windmills lining the Rhine operate independently of the human factor, existing amidst natural conditions. Their creators and caretakers can only utilise them in accordance with natural conditions. In their case, the modern chasm between *techne* and *physis* has not yet opened. However, the nuclear power plant maximally utilises the inherent energy potential of water within pre-calculated parameters, thus being forced to achieve increasingly higher performance. The energy produced by modern technical devices is *ordered* by certain higher authorities, and the generated energy is stored for later use. This results in the dissolution of humanity's relationship with the original rhythm of *physis*.

Extraction, storage, transformation, and distribution become modalities of bringing forth from concealment.[19] In this way, existence is subordinated to the criteria of quantifiability. What cannot be calculated is no longer considered real. There is a certain status of nature that is

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[18] From this perspective, the most relevant works are *The Origin of the Work of Art*, *The Question Concerning Technology*, and *Building Dwelling Thinking.*

[19] A more detailed and complex analysis would be required to elaborate on the metaphysical implications carried by the divergence of these pragmatist categories from the classical, poetic modes of revealing. However, we are less concerned here with these specific Heideggerian distinctions than with understanding the essence of technology and production in the 20th century, for which Heidegger's perspective provides excellent insights.

subjected to the rationality of production, and it is entirely different from the being celebrated in Hölderlin's poems as the "clearing of self-revealing truth". Nature today is a *managed* nature. (We are aware that today, amidst the global dominance of technology, it is hardly possible to engage in the dual metaphysical interpretation of nature understood as both a resource and an inspiring entity; that Heidegger succeeded in this regard during his time is evidenced by the fact that humanity then still remembered that particular "poetic" aspect of nature. Technological expansion has become so self-evident today that similar discussions may seem anachronistic. In contrast, human alienation in relation to technological hegemony has emerged as one of the dominant issues in continental philosophy over the past half-century.)

Here, we arrive at the essence of Heidegger's concept of technology: when Heidegger repeatedly claims that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological", he is referring to the ontological shift that distances humanity from its original place and purpose, reducing it to a mere technical system where human dignity is degraded into empty instrumentality. Heidegger considers technology, emerging in the context of orderability and producibility, as a phenomenon that permeates the globalised world. He designates it with the term *Ge-stell*, which traditionally means "frame" or "scaffolding", though he uses it in a non-conventional, non-instrumental sense. It would be futile to approach the essence of technology through a purely technical device. Nevertheless, we can perceive a certain mental analogy between modern technology and the physical structure of scaffolding: the

interconnected elements of technology, encompassing production processes, form a structural unity that can be likened to the part-whole relationship found in the construction of scaffolding. In this structural framework lies the essence and danger of modern technology. Modern technology does not "produce" in the traditional sense. In its operation, the human factor is hardly identifiable. Instead, we are confronted with an autonomous structure that, once set in motion, does not require human care; rather, it subordinates humanity to a vulnerability manifested in the form of orderability, driven by the relentless demand for continuous service.

The essence of *Ge-stell* lies in the unwavering demand for predictability and orderability. The technology that permeates the world has long severed its connection to the essence of things, and the craftsmanship that once manifested this essence has ceased to exist. While the craftsmen of Plato's time were able to create through individual professional knowledge and personal skill, modern technology derives its essence from the specific unveiling of what is concealed, and this essence is by no means technical in nature. Therefore, explanations targeting the functionality of modern technology must be sought outside of the given phenomenon.

What, then, is the essence of technology? As we have seen, it does not lie in the specific production relations, in technical occupations, or even in the individual's relationship to the material to be worked on, as such relationships no longer exist today. The essence of *Ge-stell* lies in the relationships that fundamentally determine production,

which, as a seemingly perfectly functioning mechanism, extensively dictate what, how much, and when individuals should produce, subtly forcing both producers and consumers into a globalised technical-economic cycle. We will remain distant from the essence of technology understood as *Ge-stell* as long as we are confined to instrumental and anthropological explanations, since the essence of technology must be understood metaphysically, beyond its own functionality.[20] Today, technology is more than a rationally directed process responding to the demands of utilitarianism. We are dealing with a comprehensive phenomenon that is not merely the product of a particular cultural era but, due to its absolute dominance, defines the cultural atmosphere itself. *Ge-stell* represents the rise of absolute technical dominance, which is far removed from the independent decisions of individuals and the self-organising strategies of institutions, as it inherently favours the emergence of a specific type of person. This so-called "technical man" is, at the level of his mindset and activities, far removed from the nature-connected state of the Greeks, from the proximity to being in which *poiesis* could attain its rightful expression.

Modern technology constitutes a system in which the principles of Aristotelian causality are elusive. While causal determinations are not absent in the current configuration, they are far removed from the meaningfulness, goal-oriented nature, and originality characteristic of *poiesis* – qualities that, through the ontological role of the efficient cause, grant a

[20] Cf. Heidegger: op. cit., p. 145–150.

distinguished status to the creator. The creative individual is, above all, displaced from modern production processes.[21] Modern production is gradually becoming detached from the producer, as in a deindividualized relational existence, no one can provide answers to the questions of "who?" and "why?". It is not the individual who produces, driven by sovereign insight and natural needs, but rather the mechanism of *Ge-stell* that compels people into a production process devoid of purpose. Thus, in the era of *Ge-stell*, the logic of production is to be found not in the creative consciousness of the producer but in the operational modalities of a technology that is hermetically sealed within itself.

Modern technology offers only superficial solutions and leads to misconceptions. It presents itself as applied natural science, yet it diverges from the foundational ideals of science. While it promises to simplify the operational aspects of our lives, it conceals an invisible instrumental trap, subtly controlling and limiting human agency.

In the realm of modern technology, the productive, hands-on approach rooted in creation is foreign. Although modern technology does indeed produce, it does not do so within the ontological dimensions of causality. Instead, it

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[21] Heidegger interprets the gradual exclusion of individuality from broadly defined creative processes as one of the unfortunate consequences of modern rationality. The replacement of the work of the research scientist by group research, along with the substitution of the applicable technique for the principled, law-like interpretation of natural phenomena – what we understand as scientific inquiry – points to the pragmatist zeal of our time. Such perspectives reflect the influences of Husserl, who wrote extensively on crisis.

unfolds under the tyranny of availability and orderability, where further production, driven purely by quantitative considerations, is continually demanded. This is where the totalitarian and coercive nature of modern technology lies: it demands further functionality and embeds itself in the endless, aimless cycle of overproduction, without clear justification, driven purely by the demand that production continues for its own sake. This uncontrollable production is not merely a characteristic of our postmodern world but a specific feature of the mode of being that Heidegger calls *Ge-stell*.

What historical fate remains for humanity under the reign of *Ge-stell*? It might seem that a final, irrevocable alienation is its inevitable destiny. However, if the humanity of *homo humanus* becomes definitively subordinated to a power recently celebrated in the form of the Industrial Revolution as modernity's greatest achievement, then we must reconsider the lessons of the past two centuries and re-evaluate the image we hold of it. Heidegger's classical interpretations – if we can even speak of such – suggest that it is not technology itself that carries a negative connotation, but rather our relationship to it. A telling statement from the Spiegel interview refers to humanity's still immature, and ultimately harmful, relationship with technology: "up to the present we have not yet found a way to respond to the essence of technicity".

Humanity's place in the era of technology is intertwined with the historical fate of its existence. The destiny of modern humans lies in being tested by the possibilities brought about

by the development of technology. Thus, the world of technology is not, after all, the source of ultimate alienation. Our historical mission does not depend on abolishing technology itself, but rather on how we express our relationship to it ontologically. We can become slaves to technology, risking our humane values, or we can dominate it, realizing our human purpose. However, this attention to the mystery and its realization in the form of poetic dwelling belongs to a different discussion.

One of the merits of Heidegger's critique of technology lies in his unique sensitivity to the illusory, deceptive nature of the well-being and comfort offered by the technical world. In a world where everything functions and seemingly well-operating things demand further functionality, individuals gradually begin to perceive technological achievements as the voice of God, leading them to the impression that they can finally exert control over the vicissitudes of nature and history. "In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence."[22] In a world where we are left with only technical relationships, we must reconsider the significance attributed to calculative thinking and recognize the importance of reflective thought and poetry. As soon as we find ourselves with only technical relationships, "the uprooting of man that is now taking place is the end of everything human, unless thinking and poetizing once again regain their nonviolent power".[23]

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[22] Heidegger: op. cit., p. 154.

[23] In this context, see the statements from the *Spiegel* interview and *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*.

We can see how a shift in emphasis occurs in Heidegger's analysis of technology: the philosopher continually transitions from a critique of technology that encompasses production strategies to the alienating consequences of the inadequate relationship between humanity and technology. And here emerges another argument in favour of the notion that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological". If technology were to contain its meaning and purpose intrinsically, we could not speak of a human destiny that is constituted in terms of our relationship to it. However, the notion of Fate, which emerges as a central theme in *Being and Time*, refers to the relationalism of the structure of the "compelling framework" (*Ge-stell*) in a dual manner. On one hand, as a mechanism that integrates individual initiatives, the unstoppable hegemony reduces the individual to a structural unit of the system. On the other hand, from the perspective of speculative thought, the possibility remains for the thinker to maintain a critical, distanced relationship. We cannot speak of the demon of technology, but we must consider the mysterious nature of its existence.[24]

The danger of technology – if such a danger exists – lies in its mode of revealing the essence of things. Like the

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[24] The essence of technology and the problem of the secret belong to the poetic aspect of Heidegger's thought and lie outside the scope of our current discussion. To better delineate the *Ge-stell* within the spheres of *techne*, we can recall the idea that truth is best expressed by the thinker and the poet. After all, the place of truth is certainly not found in objects meant for everyday use but rather in artworks that reveal essence, emerging as a result of poetic expression.

masterful interventions of the ancients, technology also makes the essence of things – and thus, the truth – visible. However, due to its mode of operation, it tends to become autonomous, rendering its essence-revealing tendencies mysterious and uncheckable. At this point, we arrive at the potential danger of the dominance of technology: the *Ge-stell* possesses sufficient internal logic and energy to expose the truth "by its own hand", while proclaiming the illusion of alleviating human fate. The limitation of the power of the *Ge-stell* can only be expected from the human factor.

We can hardly attempt to present the Heideggerian metaphysics of technology without addressing the consideration of human essence in this context. As noted in Michel Haar's book, the value categories that define our fateful mission include language, nation, memory, creation, and thought. Their victory over utilitarianism could ensure the salvation of human essence amidst the atomic age. To this end, Heidegger refers to the opposition between reflective and calculative thinking. In a lecture delivered on the anniversary of a composer's death, which was later published as a study, Heidegger openly critiques the positions prevalent in academic circles that overestimate technology.

Heidegger perceives the dangers of the atomic age not so much in the specific physical possibilities afforded by new discoveries, but rather in the overestimation of these possibilities. Thus, the greatest problem of the technological era is of a mental nature. When he asserts that "up to the present we have not yet found a way to respond to the essence of technicity", he also refers to the cultural immaturity of the

contemporary consumer subject. The man of the atomic age still carries the unreserved enthusiasm for the theoretical orientation of modern times, failing to reckon with the unprecedented fact that the current applied sciences are far from being about an indifferent understanding of nature; rather, they expose it to subjugation. The illusory notions regarding the utility of science were epitomized by a statement made at a conference in the 1950s, attended by eighteen Nobel laureates: "Science – understood as modern natural science – leads to a happier life for humanity."[25]

The scientists who endorse applied knowledge, due to their professions, overlook the lifelessness of scientific advancement. We can only expect results regarding the benefits of science and technology from reflective thinking, as science, in itself, remains silent – at least when it comes to assessing its own metaphysical relevance. However, it is not easy to transition from the prevailing rationality to a speculative reasoning that explores boundaries. The unimpeded and uncritical advancement of modern science can be attributed to its distance from philosophical reasoning. "The relationship between science and thought is original and fruitful only when the chasm that yawns between the sciences becomes visible, and indeed, as something that is insurmountable. There is no bridge leading from the sciences to thought; there is only a leap."[26] Therefore, it is impossible to thematise the benefits and drawbacks of science starting from science itself.

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[25] Heidegger: *Érzetlenség*, p. 277.
[26] Idem: *Mit jelent gondolkodni?*, p. 10.

The overestimation of the benefits of science points to a lack of philosophical reflection and a bias toward factors that seemingly facilitate our lives.[27] We forget that in the world of the *Ge-stell*, "nature becomes a single vast refuelling station", overlooking how "scientific technology has been able to discover and liberate new energies within nature".[28] Clarifying these questions requires the operation of a human reason that transcends technical rationality – a reason that has long been in the process of departing from our Western rationality. The meaning of the technical world can probably only be illuminated through reflective thinking; indeed, "the meaning of the technical world is concealed"[29] because, as has already been mentioned, it must be sought outside of itself. The problematics of the meaning of the atomic age can be viewed as a metaphysical challenge, as it confronts us with a *mystery* that strains our logic derived from the Aristotelian legacy. The human freedom in relation to the technical dimension remains uncertain, as the reality that remains concealed from our understanding in the atomic age leaves us vulnerable, along with our *openness to the mystery* that addresses us. In the philosopher's view, confronting the essence of technology is equivalent to illuminating the hidden meaning of being. Thus, along this path, we again arrive at the thought of the relationship to being.

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[27] In this context, it is worth recalling the famous statement from *What Is Called Thinking?*: "Science does not think." Science is not self-referential, and the criteria of its goal-oriented rationality must be sought outside its essence.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

Our relationship to the essence of the atomic age remains unclear and uncertain, as we still lack the language that would allow us to conceive its metaphysical structure. Moreover, amid the deafening noise of technical instruments, humanity has become incapable of hearing the voice of being, which is simultaneously one of the hypostases of contemplative thought. The complete absence of contemplative thought and the neglect of our fateful sense of mission are referred to as *insensitivity* within Heidegger's conceptual apparatus.

Conversely, the freedom of relation, which can be expressed in a more adequate stance toward the dominance of technology, leads to a questioning of the structural effectiveness of the *Ge-stell* that drives humanity. Ultimately, the governability of modern technology by subjective human factors points to the instability of the *Ge-stell*. Nevertheless, the totalitarian execution of the age of technology is indisputable.

It would be an exaggeration to associate the *Ge-stell* with totalitarian rule if we could not demonstrate its influence in altering the traditional values of our Western culture. The *Ge-stell* signifies the end of the totalizing essence-based perspective that can be traced back to Greek tradition. The former metaphysical thinking, once regarded as the pinnacle of intellectual achievement, is now supplanted by technology. The fulfilment and ultimate conclusion of philosophical thought coincides with the advent of technical dominance. We are not confronting the definitive death of philosophy, but rather the historical potential within the history of science that philosophy has established during modernity in relation to the development of the sciences. In other words, the world of *Ge-*

stell is not alien to the Western metaphysical tradition; it emerged within its paradigms but, having distanced itself from any worldview, has become incapable of conceiving its own status and purpose. "Philosophy becomes the empirical science of humanity, the science of everything that can be experienced by humans through their technology, with which they establish themselves in the world by working on it in various ways of making and shaping. […] The end of philosophy manifests itself as a manageable arrangement of the scientific-technical world and the corresponding social order."[30]

The advent of a technical hegemony based on calculative thinking represents far more than a mere historical curiosity in the realm of science. It signifies a genuine qualitative shift in Western civilization, one that redirects the focus from the spiritual and cultural inhabitability of the surrounding world to the production-centric nature of a predictable arrangement. Society, attuned to the logic of production, must reconcile itself with a new world order.

The person of the technological age is largely an unconscious captive of a totalitarian system. "Once man positions himself within the realm of *Ge-stell*, he loses his freedom to relate to it."[31] He does not create this system; rather, by his very mode of being, he is already embedded within it – this could not be otherwise, since in the age of technology, no mode of being can be found that is alien to technology. This particular functionality, the dominance of

[30] Heidegger: *A filozófia vége és a gondolkodás feladata*, p. 258 et passim.
[31] Idem*: Întrebare privitoare la tehnică*, p. 150.

producibility and orderability, inherently shapes our individual destinies. For this reason, I argue that we can speak of a totalitarianism in the age of technology that suppresses the unique and the original. Furthermore, considering the hegemony of technological dominance, it can be suggested that the totalitarianisms characteristic of the 20th century were perhaps less political and more technical in nature.

1.2. The Classical Face of Totalitarianism

The 20th century can be considered the century of totalitarianism from several perspectives. At least in political terms, history rarely provides such sharply drawn debates between freedom and compulsion, most of which had significant practical consequences. The tragedy and deeply sobering seriousness of totalitarianism lay in its forced practical manifestations. (It remains questionable, however, whether we can already speak of it in the past tense.) Politically recognized totalitarianism is often equated with autocracy, despotism, and dictatorship, while democracy, conceived as its opposite, is understood as the free will of the people – not only in a political sense. However, we must be aware that such a lexical definition of totalitarianism keeps us distant from grasping its true essence.

In the following, I will attempt to extend the semantic sphere of totalitarian phenomena beyond their political dimension, aiming to assess the totalitarian nature of technological dominance in the Heideggerian sense, and to offer a metaphysical interpretation of this particular form of

totalitarianism. As a first step, I will articulate some observations concerning the essence of totalitarianism, before problematizing the metaphysical structure of totalitarianism as it manifests in the form of technology.

The first point we must clarify regarding the essence of totalitarianism concerns the sphere of its validity. In this discussion, I aim to establish a comprehensive understanding of totalitarianism, even with the ambition of uncovering its metaphysical foundations – if indeed they exist. Totalitarianism is, above all, an absolutist, all-encompassing cultural phenomenon that radically excludes exceptions and dissenting viewpoints. The origins and circumstances of totalitarianism can be traced back to the first three decades of the last century, a period in which European humanity began to lose faith in the Enlightenment-era ideals of liberty. Philosophically, too – while reading Hegel and Nietzsche – people started to engage with the notion of power and began to surrender their fate to forces that, though primarily political and social in nature, transcended their specific manifestations in terms of their operational mechanisms.

Totalitarianism began with the absolutisation of the power of the State and the significant restriction of individual freedom. However, in this form, it constituted a relatively transparent and somewhat controllable apparatus. Any thinking individual could discern to what extent someone partook in power and the degree to which that power was corrupt. In this sense, the totalitarianism of communist states was a well-orchestrated and mutually deceitful theatrical

performance.[32] Individuals enjoying heightened forms of power brazenly lied to maintain their positions of authority, while the average person "believed" the fabrications about the State – either out of fear or unethical practicality. Thus, Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism became a system based on a double lie, one that ultimately undermined its own operation over time. It was a political and social entity in which people lied on two fronts: first, by promising illusory values to their peers, and second, by feigning agreement with ideologies that were clearly on shaky ground – making it unsustainable. Consequently, it can now be regarded merely as a point of interest in political philosophy.

In a more attentive analysis, we might even identify aspects of it that call into question the legitimacy of the values of our liberal society. Totalitarianism possesses a characteristic that is more metaphysically than politically graspable: it subordinates the individual, in their entirety, to a super-individual, uncontrollable force. Totalitarianism manifests where the individual becomes the victim of the Whole. It is unnecessary to elaborate on how Hegel's objective and absolute Idea, based on a logically flawless system of philosophy of spirit, represents a uniquely statist position within Western philosophy by subordinating the individual to the general. Such statist excesses are, nonetheless, short-lived because they contradict the logic of common sense; most absolutist theories falter when subjected to the test of

[32] See in this regard Liiceanu's phenomenological analysis of the ethically justifiable lie that is inescapable in political life in his book *Despre minciună*.

individuality. This is evidenced by the fact that any theory advocating the hegemony of impersonal forces eventually encounters radical criticism. It is no coincidence that we regard Kierkegaard as Hegel's "official" opponent or Karl Popper as the rational critic of statist excesses.

Totalitarianism, which transcends individual freedom, manifests where the ruling power presents itself as a self-sufficient entity. Totalitarian power consistently seeks to impose the illusion of unity.[33] One will, one leader, one law – yet it is precisely power that acts solely at its own discretion. The totalitarian system is a form of anarchy from which the masses are excluded, both in terms of its enjoyment and exercise. Tracing its roots, Herbert Spiro demonstrated that the term first appeared in 1929 in *The Times*, referring to fascist and communist regimes.[34] At the same time, Carl Schmitt begins to use the term "total state". Both were aware that the rise of totalitarianism was rooted in the crisis of values and cultural deadlock of the first three decades of the century. The critique of massification, bureaucratization, individualization, and increasing manipulability evident in the works of Nietzsche, Spengler, and Ortega y Gasset suggested the necessity and impending emergence of a strong leader capable of directing the "mob". However, at that time, no one

[33] The ideology of unity and equality is one of the most transparent lies, as the chasm between the leaders and the led deepens, and social inequalities can be concealed only through the instruments of intimidation. Therefore, we can hardly speak of the metaphysical (substantial) foundations of totalitarian power.

[34] Cf. Zăpârţan: *Doctrine politice*, p. 382 et passim.

accounted for the perilous contradiction between philosophical reflections and political concretization.

By setting aside the historical roots of power's exclusivist expansion (e.g., Bolshevism), I will continue to focus on the ideological and conceptual background. From this perspective, totalitarianism is the victim of a misguided hypothesis which posits that the dominance of unity is a more favourable solution than the parallel realization of particular wills in any context. The connection between individual happiness and universal dominance is rooted in the hyperbolisation of the general into a transcendent entity.[35] Here, individuals are not autonomous beings but rather building blocks of an organic system. Their dignity is entirely subordinated to power: they derive their personal value through qualitative identification with the leader's identity. The leader becomes the symbol of the system, the custodian of its values, and the representative of the common will, while average citizens gradually find their existence only through the leader. The all-powerful *egocratic* force seeks to create the impression that it has aligned itself with the spirit of the people and the issues facing the masses, thereby representing and embodying the "solution". This, in turn, raises suspicions of blatant falsehood in the eyes of the individual, who, upon

[35] In this context, it is worth considering that dictatorial systems have sought to consolidate their leaders' power through a specific rhetoric that pertains to them. In the media debates of recent democratic decades, this censored rhetoric, which cloaked the leader in a transcendent light – particularly by avoiding any mention of their mortality – has often been a subject of analysis.

witnessing the ostentation of power, becomes acutely aware of the "human, all-too-human" nature of the manipulation.

It is important to note that most dictatorships are based on power that is *appropriated as their own*. In this sense, every dictatorship rests on weak foundations, as it only takes a strengthening opposition to ignite a revolution and overthrow the regime. A presumably flawed system, which discloses its weaknesses from certain perspectives, can be easily dismantled. Every totalitarian regime has ultimately proven to be a self-destructive system. The secretive nature of official decisions, the dismantling of civil society, and the subservience of individuality through lies and violence have all contributed to undermining the working citizen's initially strong faith in unity and solidarity.

Hannah Arendt[36] identified six characteristics of totalitarianism, three of which we will cite here to support our argument: total loyalty to the regime, excluding any possible competing institutions (e.g., the Church); the enforcement of uniform ideals, even at the cost of sacrificing traditionalism or ideals of progress; and the creation of an artificial social hierarchy based on submission to power.

From these three characteristics, the weaknesses of politically-based totalitarianisms become apparent – weaknesses that are far less obvious in the case of technological dominance. Centralized power deliberately and demonstrably intervenes in the private sphere, explicitly exposes its ideology, and engages in conspicuous propaganda,

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36 Arendt: *Originile totalitarismului*, p. 381–407.

while still leaving a place for man within its order. However, none of this is as overtly present in the case of technological dominance.

The twilight of totalitarian regimes is linked to the strengthening of the sovereignty of individual will and the spread of a postmodern sensibility. It is no coincidence that the philosophical discourse of the late 1990s began to engage with the categories of solidarity, irony, and self-sacrifice, as evidenced by the dialogue between Vattimo and Rorty.[37] The once all-powerful systems, which had portrayed themselves as the sole authentic world religions, transformed with the end of the Cold War into carriers of the terror of production/ consumption and the dominance of technology.

As a closing thought, we might cite François Chatelet in this regard: "Totalitarian factuality is there, in its ceaselessly threatening, eerie presence. It should be connected – just as Hannah Arendt does – to the mystification of modern industrial societies, of which it is a terrifying consequence [...]. It appears far graver for humanity, as it fails to reckon with the problem of historical meaning and the values that should guide all of this."[38] Despite its inhumane nature, totalitarianism contains, to a certain extent, the potential to unveil its own concealed nature during a particular historical event, which could result in its transformation into its opposite, liberalism. However, this is not the case with the dictatorship of technology.

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37 See Rorty and Vattimo: *Viitorul religiei. Solidaritate, caritate, ironie*.

38 Zăpârțan: op. cit., p. 395.

1.3. On the Totalitarianism of Technological Dominance

The totalitarian phenomena of the last century were made possible by the full application of modern technological capabilities. The intrusion of power into the private sphere, the trickling down of state measures to the individual level, and the surveillance of individuals deemed to threaten collective interests were all enabled solely by advanced electronic and communication technologies. The modification of the ontological boundaries of the world is inseparable from the spread of dictatorial manifestations permeating it. The overcoming of distance through telecommunications and vehicles, the transformation of night into day via artificial lighting, and the ability to follow events occurring in distant parts of the world in "real time" have all gradually contributed to the emergence of a new world order. I do not intend to analyse the ontology of this world order here; I would only like to highlight a single thought: the technical domination criticized by Heidegger has indeed modified the political landscape of the world, merging the individual into an informatised machinery and enabling the global manifestation of power systems that oversee individual initiatives. We can thus see how technical expansion is inherently linked to totalitarianism, as it too bears a totalitarian hue.

I have previously made several brief remarks regarding the dependence of totalitarian systems on technology and the totalitarian nature of technological dominance. In the following, I will reflect on the philosophically relevant structure of the contemporary totalitarianism ushered in by

technology, drawing applicable lessons from the political experience of totalitarianism.

One of the early critics of the objectifying effect of technological dominance was Husserl, who, in agreement with Granel's cited views, identified the crisis of the 1930s in a misinterpreted rationalism. This crisis manifests as the ultimate expression of modern rationality and can be attributed to the naivety that took for granted the dichotomy between subject and object, neglecting the problematic nature of their conditions of possibility. The roots of the postmodern era's boundless consumption and the dominance of the atomic age can be found, not least, in the naive cult of reason of modernity and the dualistic perspective that thinks in terms of the concepts of good and evil.

The modern thinker, who nurtured a boundless faith in progress, could not have foreseen the consequences of the dualism between object and subject. Once everything becomes an object, things cease to present themselves as concrete realities for the subject; they no longer exist as isolated entities, and the world transforms into a vast energetic and instrumental network that absorbs humanity, space, and time. In such a context, we cannot speak of a rationalisable relationship to the things to be worked on; instead, we encounter a circular, neurotic process in which the individual continually seeks to occupy a position of power while simultaneously being a victim of the dominance of technology as a consumer. The boundlessness and indeterminacy of production lead to an existential loss with anthropological and phenomenological implications.

The dominance of neurotic, self-repeating production has been compounded by the terror of a similarly obsessive consumption. In his essay on the "paradox of happiness", Lipovetsky provides an excellent description of the joy of consumption, which is wrapped in the emptiness of the purchasing experience, devoid of any finality. Once hyper-consumption transcends the boundaries of consumer behaviour that fits within existential frameworks, it also exceeds the parameters of natural alleviation of living conditions and the spirit of democratic consumption. The detrimental effects of consumerism manifest in the reduction of objects' intrinsic value to mere exchange value, the expression of values almost exclusively through the strict measure of money, and, consequently, the transformation of individuals into helpless consumers. In his book *To Have or to Be?*, Erich Fromm regarded the consumer subject itself as a consumer product, integrating it into social relations where its very essence is subjected to consumption.

According to Lipovetsky, unlimited consumption stems from the Western individual's distorted conception of happiness. In this new consumer ethics, moral references become blurred, and individuality dissolves in the egoism of slogans like "I need this" and "I possess this". In this "worldless" world, individuals become acutely aware of the threat to the authenticity of their selfhood, as echoed in the simple yet thought-provoking remarks of the elderly Gadamer, who proves himself a worthy disciple of Heidegger in this respect. In Gadamer's epistemological hermeneutics, modern applied sciences have no connection to traditional

theoria, the innate human desire for knowledge, disinterested understanding, or the manifestation of things before the knowing consciousness, which would compel the mind toward genuine theoretical engagement and contemplation. Contemporary science excludes the questioning attitude, compelling individuals to the unavoidable use of technical tools. While classical science allowed the scholar to maintain a freely affirmative or dismissive stance, the use of technical tools is no longer a matter of individual choice but rather a prerequisite for minimal social existence. According to the concluding insights of Gadamer's later writings, the unified creative potential of *phronesis*, *poiesis*, and *techne* ceases to exist under technical domination, making way for a depersonalizing, calculative attitude

The philosophical critiques of technology by Gadamer and Heidegger resonate with the ideas about the role and development of technology in the 1970s and 1980s. However, a significant difference is observable regarding the conception of technology's actual reality. Scholars tended to settle for sociological surveys that presented the anticipated developments of technology in the near future, justifying its importance by highlighting its increasingly intense presence in all areas of life. They only briefly addressed public doubts about technology, which were often dismissed as groundless fears of the unknown.

As a noteworthy reference, I would like to highlight some biased yet thought-provoking evaluations from a 1982 conference dedicated to the development of microelectronics, particularly concerning the benefits of technology: "According

to certain estimates, factories in the 2000s will be composed of interconnected modular computer systems, distributed among users, ranked by functional criteria, and fed by databases. Such an integrated system will be capable of processing all functions of the company."[39] The rapid development of microelectronics, along with the complementary effects of artificial intelligence, greeted those dreaming of a "better life" under the guise of promises of efficiency and speed, optimal value-for-money ratios, manageability, and flexibility.

In contrast, philosophical approaches have ruthlessly exposed the precarious ontological foundation of technical reality. This technical reality does not possess the degree of "facilitating" potential that its designers have claimed – often for business considerations. David Harvey's book on the postmodern condition reveals the "terror-like" consequences of current production and technology through a plethora of data.

The danger of technical terror lies in the mask it wears, which promises prosperity. As Antonio Gramsci noted, Americanism and Fordism represent the greatest collective effort to create a new type of human being. This new person essentially embodies the "new worker", who rationally accepts the monetary expression of their labour and working hours. The quantifiability of labour is a cornerstone of Henry Ford's economic reforms, as the eight-hour workday, mechanized production, paid leave, and the rapid circulation of money necessitated that employers adopt a unified

[39] *Noile tehnologii de vârf şi societatea*, p. 304.

economic policy. This led to the promise of prosperity and the hope for the eradication of unemployment, but in the long term, it resulted in a new lifestyle and mindset that, in Gramsci's Marxist interpretation, could even threaten the reconfiguration of private life.

Ford was convinced that a new society could be built solely through economic reform, more specifically through the adequate management of the power of corporations. At that time, he could not foresee that the five-dollar workday, which theoretically allowed workers enough leisure time to enjoy their goods, would evolve into a self-destructive mechanism in which workers would become unable to bear their own vulnerability.

Lipovetsky writes about the concealed psychological effects of welfare societies: "The post-Fordist system, which is about to emerge, is accompanied by a significant change in the ways of stimulating demand, altering sales procedures, consumer behaviour, and the imagination."[40] Fordism, in itself, is an empty economic strategy that, lacking a metaphysical background to give it meaning, can lead to the boundlessness of consumption psychology.

At the same time, the new production relations intervened in the spatial relationships and the experience of time. Since every complex production system employs strategies to organize and regulate space and time, a portion of income was allocated to enhancing applicability and supporting habitability. However, the arrangements were

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[40] Lipovetsky: *Fericirea paradoxală*, p. 18.

never made in the interests of the workers; they were always dependent on the system's requirements. The average worker retained only the joy of easier traversal of distances with vehicles and the illusion of control over time, measurable by the clock.[41]

Behind the increasingly perfected strategies for controlling space and time, individuality and attentiveness to wholeness and tradition gradually vanish. Even concrete producing subjects hardly remain, as former workers must conform to pre-conceived economic stereotypes and rigid metrics. The initiatory individuality in the market is replaced by the dominance of an image that aligns with parameters of acceptability. This image lends success and identity – such as for the suited bank clerk. In the world of totalitarian production, our real identity becomes absorbed in the dictatorship of *das Man*, so successfully exposed in *Being and Time*, who produces and consumes the same as everyone else because, according to the American trend, "quality lies in quantity". As das Man, one lives under the levelling effect of "the same" – mass consumption, aimless imitation, the cult of quantity, and identification with foreign models – while enjoying (?) the heyday of the totalitarianism of production and technology.

The new world order established by the hegemony of technology confronts humanity with the ethics of accountability, as long as individuals preserve the essence of their humanity and use their reflective thinking as shepherds

41 See Harvey: *Condiţia postmodernităţii*, p. 250–256.

of Being to question the global processes that entangle their existence. At this point, we can refer back to Heidegger's concept of *Ge-stell*. *Ge-stell* is by no means an eternal, finalized structure of superindividual power; rather, it is a stage belonging to the development of our Western society that will eventually be transcended by itself. Historically speaking, technology is not an end goal but a possibility, and as such, it necessitates a nurturing attitude from thoughtful individuals so that it can outgrow its current adolescent totalitarian nature. Thus, in unison with Heidegger, we may assert: "We refer here to the possibility that the nascent global civilization may one day transcend its technical-scientific-industrial determinism, which currently stands as the sole authoritative form of human existence in the world. This transcendence will not arise from itself or by itself, but rather through humanity's readiness for a purpose that, whether we heed it or not, may intervene at any moment in the undecided destiny of humankind."[42]

[42] Heidegger: *A filozófia vége és a gondolkodás feladata*, p. 261.

2. *Homo Consumericus:* The Substantialism of Consumption and the Promise of Happiness

2.1. The Paradoxical Nature of *Homo Consumericus*

In our time, the traditional relationship between production and consumption has lost its classic Marxist connotation, replaced by the dynamic between the consumer's desires and the consumable item endowed with symbolic functions. In this relationship, production becomes an object of "religious autonomy",[1] as it ceases to operate as a strategic process serving specific needs, transforming instead into a foundational element of social processes based on the principle of repetition. Consumption thus emerges as a distinctly social phenomenon, revealing the novel and unprecedented profile of *homo consumericus* in history.

Homo consumericus defines its human essence through consumption. The enduring social attitude of the consumer subject, who subscribes to the slogan "I am what I consume", can be deemed responsible for the laws governing boundless production and consumption. Production, once finely attuned to the measure and rhythm of satisfying needs, was

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[1] Baudrillard: *L'Echange symbolique et la mort*, p. 25.

purposeful and possessed a sense of finality. However, consumption has since transformed into a lifestyle – a self-serving pleasure that becomes increasingly dependent on the generation of surplus. Once the economic mechanism is unable to operate with excess, demand loses its intrinsic purpose. Baudrillard wrote about how the welfare society has liberated desires, but these desires no longer belong to the society that triggered them; rather, they become "productive forces facilitated by the functioning of the system".[2] As a result of the self-organization of production strategies, needs are no longer attributed to the individual but to the system itself.

Once we establish that the needs of the contemporary consumer are dictated by the system, resulting in artificial desires, the identity of *homo consumericus* becomes questionable. As a seemingly irrational consumer, this new type of individual can be viewed both as the sum of accumulated desires and as a being whose decisions regulate the rhythm of social life. From Gilles Lipovetsky's analysis,[3] we see that the contemporary consumer individual does not possess a clearly defined economic and social profile. Instead, the conflict between the system that exerts influence on them and the desires rooted in their personal life history often leads to contradictory consumer attitudes.

Before delving into specific arguments, I would assert that the *homo consumericus* represents a paradoxical personality type. Emerging from our eclectic postmodern era, it embodies the contradictions between subjective desires and the spectrum of

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[2] Idem: *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, p. 87.

[3] Lipovetsky: op. cit.

needs imposed by the system. It simultaneously shapes and is shaped by our contemporary consumer society. To grasp its contradictory psychosocial profile, we must primarily investigate the recently evolved dynamics of consumption as a phenomenon and its current social representation.

2.2. Universalisable Demands and Global Impact

To interpret the psychosocial profile of the consumer individual philosophically, we will primarily rely on Gilles Lipovetsky's work *Le bonheur paradoxal: Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation*.

Lipovetsky's analysis of consumption begins with the hypostatization of two new facets of modernity: a social facet and an anthropological facet. The former arises from a reorganized social practice that has redefined its priorities, while the latter refers to the intellectual profile of individuals who rely on a new value system and expectations centred around consumption. Amidst the civilization of desire, the hierarchy of previous desires is re-evaluated, as is the sphere of communal engagement inspired by communitarian values, not to mention the realm of subjective expectations.

Without making it the explicit subject of argumentation in this work, Lipovetsky hints that behind the systematic analysis of the paradoxes of consumer society lies a presupposed image of the current atomized way of life, which is based on the profane religiosity of materialism.[4] Behind the

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[4] I will elaborate further on the ethical and historical precedents of existence through the mode of consumption in the following chapter.

global expansion of consumption lies a new economic policy that signals a profound transformation of the paradigms of 19th-century capitalism. Traditional production relations were aligned with normal needs, but individual demand levels were continuously subordinated to institutionalized economic rationality. In contrast, in the postmodern context of life, we witness the complete liberation of needs. It is not the individual who adjusts to the system; rather, external circumstances adapt to the expectations of individuals.

However, this "Copernican turn" in production and consumption is far from straightforward. While many thinkers – including Alvin Toffler, Jean Baudrillard, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Anthony Giddens – have highlighted the thought-provoking phenomenon of the autonomisation of desires and the subordination of production strategies, what we actually witness behind this deceptive reality is the de-individualization of the person, stemming from the seemingly limitless options that allow for freedom. The self-sustained neo-capitalist mass consumption is built on a series of paradoxes.

Today's mass consumer emerges both as a free, decisive agent and as a market-dependent subject. In the realm of information-driven advertising and limitless marketing, the abundance of selection alternatives undoubtedly takes centre stage. However, lurking beneath this facade is a torrent of unruly, sprawling, and uncontrollable desires. The growth of the hyperconsumer's interest and purchasing potential conceals a dual threat. On the one hand, it pertains to the internal drive of curiosity for the new, and on the other hand,

to the hypertrophy of market phenomena and the external pressures weighing on the consumer. The outcome is inevitable: a sense of dissatisfaction and the instability of the emotional basis for controlling desires, whereby "the more the buyer demonstrates their self-determination, the more evident the external determinations stemming from the commercial order become".[5]

Consumption, now detached from existential frameworks and natural regulations, poses more psychological challenges for individuals. As it primarily serves psychological drives – since consumer hedonism aimed at sensual pleasure, bulimia, and the material fulfilment of ever-new dreams have little to do with basic needs – it places individuals in the path of further psychological challenges and crossroads. The mass consumer often believes that their internal balance, increasingly uncertain sense of harmony, and fulfilment can be achieved through a poorly understood form of material self-actualization. This results in a perfect market resonance of internal consumer impulses. In principle, any perceived sense of lack has a corresponding offer in the marketplace, with a full range of products accessible to various needs and income levels. However, lurking behind the relative ease of purchasing these products is the nightmare and deceit surrounding the significance of consumer identity.

In a world of insatiable demands, a reactionary orientation of production relations emerges. The self-regulating logic of production serves as a background steering

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[5] Lipovetsky: op. cit., p. 8.

mechanism, influenced by the quantitatively unlimited growth of consumption. Behind the phenomenon of hyperconsumption lies the intersection of subjective needs and the pragmatic agendas of global multinational trusts.[6] Economic success aims to exploit the sense of lack implanted in the collective unconscious of the potential consumer masses. It must constantly generate desires for the new and the extraordinary to lay the groundwork for the future. By promising a postponed experience of success and optimism, it seeks to instil in people an unbearable feeling of emptiness associated with these suggested states of lack.[7] Behind the exponentially growing, artificially maintained sense of lack lies the terror of increasing individual depression.

To satisfy preferences rooted in depression, an ever-expanding supply remains in constant readiness, striving to impose its products that hold the "key to eternal happiness" upon the masses. In the arena of growing feelings of lack and the aggressively responsive marketing strategies designed to address them, individuals can easily become entangled in an extreme cycle from which the renunciation of pleasure might offer a way out. Amidst such a flexible feedback mechanism of lack and supply, one might ask: can today's mass consumer

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[6] This can also be interpreted as a conflict between absolute individual, subjective psychological motivations and the terror of calculative rationality. It is irrational in the sense that it involves the collision of differing factors; however, it becomes logical when we consider that demand and supply operate according to their own autonomous laws.

[7] Just as I examined the totalitarian nature of production in the chapter titled *A Lesson on Totalitarianism*, I could similarly discuss the terror of psychological chaos brought about by uncontrollable consumption in the current context.

pay attention to classical moral values under the conditions of mere quantitative assimilation?

Given the psychological motivations behind consumption, it is difficult to find moral barriers, as consumption is fundamentally limitless. More accurately, it is not principled factors that impose limits; rather, consumption continues until the complete eradication of the state of lack, naturally dependent on the quantity of available resources.[8]

2.3. Historical Milestones of Our Consumer Identity

The answer lies in the dynamics of demand and supply that have developed and are still evolving over the past few decades. We aim to base our analysis of the mass consumer's paradoxical, insatiable quest for happiness on a conceptual framework concerning the three stages that the consumer society has recently undergone.

The demand for material prosperity is by no means as exclusive as it may seem, given the almost cult-like visits to supermarkets, the material orientation of the quest for happiness, and, not least, the characteristics of our society labelled as *consumerist*. Lipovetsky's referenced work excellently highlights the eclectic nature of mass consumption,

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[8] In this regard, we could quote a humorous and ironic remark made by Andrei Pleşu in his television programme *Altfel*, which was eventually discontinued due to low viewership: "Consumption cannot have limits. It's natural for people to consume without restraint. For example, if a plate of plum dumplings is placed in front of me, I don't consider whether there's any left for others; I won't stop until I am completely satisfied."

warning us that behind the prevailing materialism of the 2000s lies a growing demand for human values.

Our current consumer society is the result of three closely successive developmental stages.[9] These stages are underpinned by the manufacturing systems that economically dominated the late 19th century, the rapidly evolving infrastructure, and, most significantly, the mass production that resulted from industrialization. In the first half of the 20th century, Fordist production policies offered solutions and opportunities that were unknown to previous generations. Fixed working hours, paid vacations, and social welfare provisions enabled the practical implementation of the utilitarian principle of achieving "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people".

The principle proposed by John Stuart Mill, which advocates for seeking the greatest good for the greatest number in society, seemed to be almost fully realized. Furthermore, we cannot overlook John Rawls's liberalism, which asserts that inequality is tolerable as long as it does not hinder the equal opportunities of those affected. Happiness concepts associated with consumption have become closely intertwined with the idea of ensuring a minimum standard of welfare for all, as well as with the large-scale, standardized

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[9] If we were to explore the exhaustive historical flux of the social and moral-philosophical consequences of production and consumption relations, we would need to start with Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Today, it is hardly possible to speak of the pleasures provided by mass consumption, which is based on the rationality of economy, if modernity had not developed the cult of "conscientious" work rooted in religious beliefs.

manoeuvres of capitalist production strategies. The material determination of aspirations and the demand for happiness has segmented the consumption relationships of recent decades into three distinct phases.

In the remaining part of this investigation, I will address and elaborate on these aspects, focusing on the phases of the emergence of *homo consumericus*, deferring (further) phenomenological criticism for a later examination.

1. In the second half of the 20th century, a new economic philosophy of profit maximization emerged. Along with the realization of mass production came the need to accelerate the sales pace. While classic manufacturing, with its relatively limited product lines, required the maximization of profit from each individual item, mass production opened up the possibility of large-volume sales, which proved more profitable under the principle of "selling more for (relatively) lower individual revenue". Paradoxically, greater profits were expected from price reductions – and, as soon became evident, this approach was not mistaken.

The mass sale of products necessitated the development of marketing, advertising, the branding of products to lend them identity, and the creation of visually enticing packaging. The value of a product was no longer defined by its mere utility or functionality but by the name, the associated image or concept, or the place where it became available.[10] At this

[10] At this point, the use value definitively separates from economic value. While the former depends on the existential functionality of the object, the latter is primarily shaped by its symbolic significance and its potential to represent and secure status.

level, people become the true victims of mass consumption. The mechanized, imitative personality of *homo consumericus*, who nurtures false needs without ethical discernment, emerges.

This level is economically characterized by standardization, the control of individual initiative through global programs, and the resulting far-reaching uniformity. Human factors are placed in the service of profit-oriented, worldwide agendas. From this perspective, it is worth highlighting the material malleability of the average person in the realm of consumption, the shaping of their will toward a pragmatist collective will, and, most notably, the development of an unrestrained consumer attitude encouraged by facilitated purchasing opportunities.[11]

At this point, consumption becomes a social problem and a defining phenomenon of cultural life. The rise of dazzling consumption, self-serving consumerism, and what is still fashionable today, an individual indulging in an almost endless process of entertainment, driven by insatiable consumer appetite, becomes apparent. Additionally, this is where the unfortunate relativist moralizing, which explicitly grounds happiness in a materialistic framework, starts to emerge.

2. The next step can be interpreted as a countercurrent to the “demand for quantity”. The accumulation of long-term

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[11] Lipovetsky (op. cit., pp. 22–26) illustrates the rhythm of production and consumption dynamics that began to accelerate in the mid-20th century with numerous statistical data, as well as the development of the business chains behind them. However, due to their limited philosophical relevance, we will not delve into these figures here.

consumer goods in the hands of users has led to the suspension of numerous needs. This, of course, delayed the rhythm of production. Since maintaining the accelerating production processes required a demand dynamic of at least the same pace, the most diverse arsenal of advertising techniques was employed to address the question, "Why is consuming good?".

The social attitude based on the "logic of quantity" and the "ethics of desires" is inseparable from the obsessions of the sexual revolution, feminism, and the cult of youth and corporeality. At this point, the commodity becomes a social symbol, and the representation of the object as a sign displaces its actual ontological accounting. Simultaneously, we can speak of the blurring of the boundary between the natural and the artificial, as well as the rise of copies, kitsch, and reproduction. All of this unfolds within the sphere of artificially constructed and maintained needs, threatening the reality perception of the consuming public.[12]

At this point, hedonistic individualism, the segmentation of lifestyles, and the strengthening of the private sphere elevate the consumer subject to a central role, who –amidst

12 Many accuse Baudrillard of exaggeration in his phenomenology of an uncertain sense of reality. These critics should pay attention to the continued relevance of Baudrillard's critique even two decades later. For example, in advertising texts for Blu-ray players, praised as a wonderful technological achievement for their high resolution ("providing a realistic image"), we hear slogans like "brings you closer to reality", "this is reality itself", or "introduces you to reality", which attempt to "inoculate" the human mind with the parameters of a new virtual reality through the tools of aggressive marketing.

their self-assured selection – falls victim to the terror of abundance. The "bureaucratic organization of everyday life" has highlighted consumption outside its traditional environment.[13] The individualistic consumer ethics, moving away from Victorian norms, the ideal of self-sacrifice, and the absolutisation of duty, forgot about moral boundaries and laid the groundwork for the second industrial revolution with the slogan of "liberated needs". This revolution found expression in the quantitatively manageable comfort, the level of everyday demands, and the pursuit of sensual pleasures. The criteria and conditions for personal fulfilment were largely material.

Amidst the self-serving nature of possession, people increasingly judged things less by their market value. The logic of (social) standing and status – based on the aforementioned principle of "I am what I own" – transformed consumption into a competition centred around authority. The possessing personality described by Erich Fromm became the standard.[14] Its motto, which it would never subject to criticism, is: "The basis of my existence is the possession of quality." This represents a symbolic competition for an imagined status that lends authority and ideally provokes envy, allowing individuals to identify with it and thereby grant themselves an identity.

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[13] Lipovetsky: op. cit., 29.

[14] See Fromm: *Birtokolni vagy létezni?*, p. 25. This topic would serve well as the subject of psychoanalytical investigations in the coming decade.

3. The tangibility of abundance gradually led to a weakening of status and authority based on possession. After nearly a century of material dependence, the desire for a "good life" returned to the focus of personal aspirations, reviving the importance of the joy derived from personal pleasure behind empty competition. People learned to live for themselves and consume for their own sake.

This is the phase of well-being – a well-being in which hardly any unattainable dreams exist. Well-planned bank loans allowed for the possession and use of sources of enjoyment long before the user had the minimum down payment required for the purchase. The mindset of "enjoy first, pay later" naturally came with a significant cost.

The hedonism of well-being opened a perspective toward eclectic value horizons. Personal goals and momentary ideas, along with individualized criteria, absolutized the individual's demands – but certainly not their individuality or morality. This means that discussions began to focus on human factors within the categories of market value. Once we start talking about needs as commodities, or at best, as economic factors, subjugating everything to the exclusivity of quantifying rationality, we inevitably witness the emergence of eclectic, emotion-based hyperconsumption and the self-serving hegemony of expectations.

In this ocean of supply, the existing subject has barely any opportunity to select. At least, one can question how much this selection still heeds rational arguments. As the individual – along with all the attributes of their subjectivity –

has become the focal point of consumption, the activated selective attitude, influenced by external motivations, has lost its strength. Due to the individualization of expectations and the subjectivisation of expressions and tastes, the potential for harnessing the emotional value derived from the use of things has increased. Nowadays, the expectation of renewal takes precedence over the demand for minimal comfort.

The mimetic attitude characteristic of the second stage – such as purchases initiated for social considerations and aligning with the perceived standards of the community – is replaced by a consumer attitude adopted out of personal curiosity, for the sake of self-serving change, and for the more intense exploitation of the moment's pleasure potential. The ultimate goal of this novel consumer orientation is to *attribute identity* to oneself through external appearances, thereby seeking to make my uniqueness more visible in the reflection of the originality and distinctiveness of the objects that fill the intimacy of my private sphere. Once religious and political forces lost their identity-establishing potential, *consumption that posits identity* became the most accessible tool for individuals in their efforts at self-definition.

Nowadays, what is launched on the market is not merely objects but a lifestyle that symbolically transcends their tangible functionality; templates (signs, images, symbols, and/or myths) that stimulate the imagination, emphasize sensuality, and become normative. Naturally, ethics is not merely a passive observer of the material foundations of affectivity and identity. The fact that we choose symbols rather

than objects is further reinforced by the circumstance that the object must first be transformed into a brand (imbued with a name and identity) and then its qualitative identifiers must be firmly embedded in collective memory.

The integration of consumption into the realm of personal attributes and the subjective sphere has a dual consequence: on one hand, it loses its mere material determinism, becoming personalized and subordinated to the whims of pleasure-seekers; on the other hand, it gives rise to what is known as *emotional consumption*. At this point, the subject's consumer options disregard the old requirement of conforming to public opinion, instead serving to achieve and preserve the personally manifested sense of well-being.

From such a subjectivised, personalized hedonism shaped specifically in the "image and likeness" of the Self, one could even demand a show of gratitude toward welfare policies. Behind the consolidation of excessive sensuality, shopping parties, and an endless entertainment culture lies a welfare state that easily satisfies basic needs, effectively postponing deeper realities.[15] Maximally exploiting man's inherent need for novelty,[16] the postmodern producer foregrounds the subject's aesthetic, playful, and communicative needs. Pleasure must be satisfied "here and now". At the same

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[15] However, the universal welfare that encourages excessive consumption also has its expiration date. As soon as it depletes its reserves, a crisis arises.

[16] In this context, Freud said, "novelty always serves as a source of pleasure".

time, it can be observed that the aggressive culture of sensuality suggested by advertisements bears no resemblance to classical philosophical hedonism, in which the subject of pleasure itself determined – fully aware of its situation and possibilities – the question of "how much of what" to pursue.

The third stage described here, therefore, does not sell products or things, but rather unique, novel, and strange phenomena. The consumer increasingly becomes a being that collects experiences, awaiting happiness from the moment. The present transforms into an expansive dimension in which everything is theoretically possible. What the moment is unable to provide is either something I do not deserve, does not concern me, or is simply worthless. Should we be concerned about the deterioration of the mass consumer's sense of time? Is there a risk that the mass consumer could enter a temporal drift that detaches them from both the past and the future? The answer is negative if we consider the interest in historical memories and the actions advocating for the preservation of natural balance.

Consumption, which has become a total social phenomenon, encompasses eclectic elements that touch upon the ultimate level of contradiction. Behind the egocentrism indifferent toward otherness, we find charitable actions; behind the openly professed hedonism lies a reverence for the eternal ideals of health and youth, as well as an ascetic strictness in embracing exercise and regulated, healthy eating; alongside the extravagant shows of millionaires, we also encounter the live broadcasts of overrated "good" events.

"There is no longer any contradiction between hedonism and indifference, individualism and altruism, idealism and spectacle, or consumerism and generosity."[17] What was a contradiction for our Aristotelian logic can easily be reconciled as "otherness" within the context of an eclectic and pluralistic society, or at least it is not disturbingly disharmonious.[18]

In the current stage of capitalist mass consumption, the contradictory personality and attitude of *homo consumericus* is taking shape. Thus far, we have largely referred to its sensory-centred hedonism and present-oriented individualism, without considering the decisions behind the gestures of consumption, the motivations and considerations that automatically shape the selection prevalent in the abundance of products.

It is true that on one hand we are witnessing the rampage of unidimensional humanity; on the other hand, we cannot deny the constructive nature of protest, denial, critique, and stances against massification. The phenomenon of adaptability/manipulability closely entails a selective disposition and a sense of detachment. The expansion of supply and the flood of fashion will eventually give rise to

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17 Lipovetsky: op. cit., p. 116.

18 Fewer and fewer people notice what others buy and the disparity between their average income and level of needs, or that some wealthy individuals shop at inexpensive places – and vice versa; or that some sacrifice maximally for luxury goods while needing to curb their basic necessities. Under the dominance of a self-organizing free market, the rationality of moderation ceases to exist.

nonconformist positions that traverse the side paths.[19] I will undertake the discussion of these, along with an outlook on the specific mode of existence of *homo consumericus*, in the following pages.

19 Alongside the expansion of mass cultures in any regard, there emerge more unique currents that suspect massification of superficiality, loss of quality, and identity deficiency. These are considered nonconformist as they act against social conformity; however, they have lost their usual pejorative meaning because, in an eclectic society, we cannot speak of a canonized, normal value system against which any deviation might raise the suspicion of irregularity.

3. Total Consumption and Value Awareness

3.1. On the Threshold of the Substantialism of Total Consumption

It is a mistake to think that consumption is merely a pastime of privileged individuals with material wealth, and that it is solely a material process. While this certainly falls within the traditional meaning of the term, it does not exhaust its validity. There are two reasons why it is inappropriate to understand consumption as the irreversible interiorisation of consumable goods.

The first objection can be derived from the term "consumer society" itself. This does not refer to a macrostructural community that consumes occasionally or even for the sake of subsistence. Such a level of consumption would have little cultural relevance and would hardly shape the spiritual character of society. It could not possess philosophical relevance either, since people have always consumed under the influence of existential drives. However, once consumption becomes a fundamental characteristic of existence, defining the spirit and value system of society, it can be seen as more than just a mechanism for ensuring physical existence. The consumer society exists through and during

consumption, constantly finding and understanding itself in a process of interiorisation, often without grasping the cultural relevance of that process. Self-understanding through consumption would be impossible if contemporary humanity only engaged with the material prerequisites for survival. The latter is a natural phenomenon, which – as mentioned above – is philosophically uninteresting. It would also encounter quantitative limits; a practically limitless process of material consumption is ontologically paradoxical: it would soon exhaust its finite reserves, and, upon depletion, it would eliminate existence itself. Thus, the phenomenon of unlimited consumption must be sought not in the material realm, but in the intellectual and cultural spheres.

The consumability of cultural products could in itself be the subject of separate investigation. Unlike material goods that are physically depleted through consumption, a cultural product does not diminish, no matter how many people partake in it.[1] The potential for satisfying the sense of lack is also relative and debatable – since the comprehensibility and lasting emotional imprint of a television program, book, film,

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1 The category of total consumption, when viewed from the perspective of the consumability of intellectual cultural creations, gives rise to several issues. First, it discredits the classical concept of consumption understood in terms of wear and tear. While a material consumable loses its ontic existence, its being, in the process of eliminating a state of lack, an intellectual entity can never be consumed in an ontic sense, even though it fully satisfies an intellectual need. Feelings of lack also respond differently to material and intellectual products: the satisfaction of the former can easily be followed by the emergence of new ones, while the latter not only have a “soothing” effect but also fundamentally shape the individual.

etc., vary from individual to individual. Some individuals engage with works selected based on prior experiences and preferences, without any need for external self-representation, driven solely by an internal impetus. Others encounter these works randomly, without any particular expectations. The genuine impetus for intellectual consumption cannot be random or expressed merely as an option of free time. Consumption of culture is considered true consumption when the consumer consciously and selectively engages with the values to be consumed. In this case, the finality of the process is not the physical disappearance of the interiorized values, but rather the intellectual and spiritual transformation, enrichment, acquisition of experience and knowledge, the resolution of doubts or the emergence of new ones, the identification with the other's situation, and the emotional rendering of one's own existential state, among others.

Consumption that significantly shifts into the realm of spiritual values allows for the phenomenon's fulfilment. Thanks to technological possibilities, in principle, anyone can identify with artificial images of life that are illusory but are presented as examples, disseminated by television programs and magazines that depict the imagined, desired state of existence at any time. Mass consumption does not make exceptions and leaves no remnants behind. Even those with modest financial means partake in the products of mass culture that claim to deliver "well-being" in industrial quantities. In a consumer society, one cannot escape consumption; everything unfolds within a virtual realm that has been refined to the point of stretching the limits of reality,

defined by transparency, immediacy, and subjective understanding.

By "the substantialism of total consumption", I refer to the extended consumerist attitude characteristic of our postmodern culture. Consumption, now subordinated to the authority of the global system, can no longer be confined to the material sphere but extends, following its pattern, to the world of intellectual creations as well. In fact, within the duality of material and intellectual products, the emphasis is generally placed on the latter. We consume information, images, messages, ideas, and promises. As soon as a political promise made during an election campaign appears more tangible and trustworthy than the results of the past four years, voters are more inclined to "consume" the words. But only until newer ideas come along. We must agree with Baudrillard: in the sphere we might call "extended consumption", advertising replaces the object, the promise replaces the action, and the program replaces genuine well-being.

The consequence of this is a reorganization of the ontological order: consumable reality becomes authentic existence, and whatever can be consumed is imbued with existence.

3.2. Value Awareness in the Flux of Liberated Desires

The integration of consumability into the most hidden aspects of private life shapes the eclectic personality of *homo consumericus*, the "consumer man". This eclecticism is not merely the result of the diversity of consumer attitudes among

different people or the multitude of opposing tendencies. Rather – and this is where the philosophical relevance of this human type lies – it must be understood as the simultaneity of completely different consumer choices within the same individual at a given stage of life.

Whether the now-global eclecticism of *homo consumericus* is a consequence of moral relativism, the pressure of mass production, or the overvaluation of well-being is highly debatable. What is certain is that behind these opposing tendencies lies the image of individual happiness, presumed to be attainable through the pathways of consumability. In the following sections, we will review some of the more representative happiness-generating targets of *homo consumericus*'s consumerist orientation, and then turn to a philosophical examination of the concept of happiness it embraces.

The new consumer spirit permeates and defines the conditions of physical and spiritual well-being to such an extent that we can consider it a new form of spirituality, even a new religiosity. The reinterpretation of religious *topoi* (e.g., man's otherworldly destiny, the acceptance of suffering, etc.) has reinforced an interest in immanence. As intangible transcendent values have receded into the background, receptivity to societal values has intensified. Christianity, once focused on otherworldly salvation, gradually learned to pay attention to the morality that ensures earthly joys. The aspirations for solidarity, love, tranquillity, and fulfilment have become characterized by the adaptation of religiosity to the rhythms and measures of secular civilization.

While in the past, the attainment and enjoyment of spiritual joys did not require any material representation from individuals, today it has become increasingly common to find tangible, purchasable products that regulate the intensity of purely spiritual experiences. Paradoxically, a foundation has emerged for spiritual life that is represented, provided, symbolized, and made tangible through buyable items. Spiritual life has also become dependent on consumption, presenting material stability as a veritable transcendent privilege.

In the hyper-consumer society, even spirituality becomes a commodity. The spiritual life, subordinated to the logic of commercialization, steps out of the intimacy of personal experience and into the more tangible realm of alternative medicine, Eastern-inspired esotericism, and New Age literature promoting the doctrine of unity. The intensity of spiritual experiences is less determined by personal meditation and more by the accumulation of purchasable items on one's bookshelf, objects that point to a spiritual dimension. Once religiosity becomes subordinate to consumability, the market value of objects representing spiritual experiences symbolically becomes more important than their personal function, reducing them to the status of exchange value.

Does the commercialization of spirituality eliminate classical ethical and aesthetic values that possess a transcendent quality in relation to an individual's sense of values? The place of ethics in the world of mass consumption remains an open question. It is currently a well-worn cliché that the individualistic era has abandoned governance by *a priori* values of life, just as individual interests no longer

ultimately serve the common good. Amidst this general relativism, a pressing question arises: does any sense of responsibility remain in a consumer society that succumbs to the power of money and pleasure?

The intensity of the consumer audience's attention to the origin of products, their compliance with environmental regulations, the characteristics indicated on packaging, and especially their healthiness suggests a certain ethical awareness. However, this is by no means the Kantian universalism of duty, as consumer ethics cannot be subordinated to the universal regularity of obligation. The potential of consumers is primarily regulated by their level of demand and material possibilities, seemingly rendering a sense of responsibility unnecessary.[2] At the same time, regarding the almost paranoid monitoring of quality standards, we can speak of a certain elementary "ethics".

Well-being has gradually eliminated the consumer mindset based on the raw logic of material advantage. Increasing prosperity has dismantled the mentality of ideal price-value ratios and has heightened demand for products that meet environmental standards and minimally deplete natural energy resources.[3]

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2 It seems paradoxical to even mention the moral category of responsibility in this context. Clearly, it is not about the consumer's responsibility toward the product or perhaps other buyers, but rather about the persistent quality expectations tied to the consumed items, expressed in terms of normative standards.

3 The fact that many consumers are willing to pay more for products that align with ecological and ethical standards is relevant to assessing today's consumer mindset from several perspectives.

Alongside this, a new consumer conscientiousness is emerging: the number of people participating in charitable actions and those who observe them with curiosity is increasing. In the all-encompassing world of consumption, a charitable attitude simply looks good, which, of course, rarely stems from personal value awareness, selfless neighbourly love, or altruistic willingness to sacrifice. Instead, it is more susceptible to the rationalities of advertising, the desire for visibility, and the pursuit of refreshment. On one hand, a practical, assistance-oriented approach prevails; on the other, image consolidation driven by self-promotion takes centre stage. Regardless of how we view the phenomenon of *caritas* in the postmodern context, this is not about selflessly serving the interests of the disadvantaged, but rather about foregrounding the identity and power of the donor.

In the midst of generosity becoming fashionable, the world is increasingly sentimentalized. Products are launched in emotionally evocative packaging, advertisements suggest the prototype of the perfect family and belonging, and insurance companies foster a sense of responsibility towards old age. Is this a practical moral order? Hardly – given the interests that emerge from the "charitability" of those wielding power. In reality, everything serves as a colonized tool of the power of material values, a helpless exchange value within the realm of commodities.[4] However, this is not how most people

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[4] Many entertainment programs on domestic commercial television degrade the situations of individuals struggling with physical disabilities, poverty, and emotional issues to a pitiable exchange value. Rather than offering simple and effective solutions to their problems, these programs

respond. In the midst of the growing sentimentality, they get the impression that humanitarian values are receiving increasing attention, even as their helpless curiosity – manifested in the consumption of media products discussing these issues – contributes to the commodification of certain human situations.

With the mercantilisation of needs, sensitivity to sentimentalism sharpens; however, behind the cult of love, we can observe all-too-human, that is, consumerist manifestations. The hegemony of our consumer society is not exclusivist and does not acknowledge the selective influence of moral rationality. Its eclecticism embraces the coexistence of hedonism with moderation, self-centred sensibility with altruistic generosity, and the dry logic of responsible sentimentalism. But can the consumer subject truly be happy amidst the theoretically limitless satisfaction of desires?

3.3. The Pursuit of Happiness and Consumption

When discussing the happiness needs of *homo consumericus*, we must ultimately set aside the aspects of consumption that are subordinated to economic or quantitative rationality. The correlation of consumption with psychological requirements may seem like an epiphenomenon in relation to the issues previously discussed; however, given

turn them into objects of curiosity for viewers. The price of their publicly displayed troubles is determined by the level of curiosity, sympathy, and disgust generated in the audience. This illustrates how human problems can also become consumable goods.

the psychological vulnerability inherent in any form of consumer gesture, we must pose the question of the relationship between consumption and happiness.

Consumption liberated from the limited constraints of existential demands and immediate needs quickly becomes devoted to subjective pleasures and individual, particular joys. In other words, the consumer attitude, shedding the burden of ensuring livelihood, aims primarily at securing happiness.[5] According to classical approaches, consumption exists for the sake of happiness and constitutes its precondition. In this sense, every happy moment is preceded by a subjective endeavor to alleviate one or more feelings of lack, which allows for the satisfaction arising from the elimination of that lack. In light of this relationship's rhythm, our logic suggests that the intensity of our sense of happiness depends on the quality of the consumption that precedes it. However, this conclusion is invalid in many cases.

Paradoxically, there is no precise causal relationship between consumption and the use of things. At least not in a quantitative sense, as the continuing states of lack that coexist with possession stem precisely from the uncontrollability of quantity. An ancient moral philosophical assertion[6] states that

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5 I do not aim to define the socio-phenomenological concept of happiness here. Instead, I seek to qualify the first term of the dichotomy of consumption and happiness, emphasizing the hierarchy between the two. Happiness can simply be treated as a state of subjective well-being – physical, mental, and social – characterized by an absence of disturbance or lack.

6 Epicureanism, and especially Stoicism, articulated valuable moral philosophical insights on this topic. The contemporary culture of late

the struggle for the acquisition of an object provides greater satisfaction than its ultimate possession, and that the longing for things not yet owned is more intensely felt than the joy derived from the things we possess. These two psychological *topoi* – one might say – are flawlessly realized in the previously described third stage of consumption.

The quantitatively overwhelming supply, rapid renewal, and ever-changing advertising strategies have completely relativized and boundlessly expanded the sense of fulfilment. The consumer masses have responded to this evolving offer – underpinned by unstoppable scientific and technological advancements – with the principle of "enjoyable moments in small steps": instead of seeking out expensive, long-lasting, high-quality products that provide enduring experiences and pleasures, they began to look for smaller joys derived from the ownership of cheaper, more frequently purchasable items.[7] The traditional cult of provoking others' envy, lifelong investments, and luxurious pleasures has been replaced by the joy of the moment. Mass production has particularly facilitated access to this "joy of the moment" for poorer social strata as well.

The consumption model in question seeks immediate pleasure. However, if this pleasure is too susceptible to the transient goals and possibilities of social processes and

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Hellenism and Rome, known for its enjoyment of well-being, clarified the personal and relative nature of fulfilment.

[7] See the thoughts on the nature of unstoppable technological development that threatens the continuity of human identity in the chapter titled *A Lesson on Totalitarianism*.

economic-political programs, it is unlikely to provide quality fulfilment. This explains the increasing frustrations, depressive symptoms, and emotional dead ends that serve as the subjects of lengthy television broadcasts amid mass consumption, which our culture seems to intentionally generate in order to later sell products aimed at their healing. Just as pleasure enters the market cycle, so does pain, becoming a real factor of production in the increasingly sentimental culture.

Emotionally unstable – made unstable, perhaps? – our society responds to the psychological conflicts arising from the inadequacies of consumption with further consumption. A therapized society emerges, where we consume the "the psychologist responds" column just as we follow the pity-inducing television shows lamenting the plight of the less fortunate. In the world of "signifying things", material existents gradually lose their economic value, favouring the overvaluation of advice, ideas, and images[8] – while people increasingly expect their success to come from objects they can hold in their hands.

In recent decades, the idea of philosophical counselling, which has become a possible professional objective, excellently substantiates the above statements. As mental representation, self-interest justification, and the axiological illumination of priorities become elements of self-awareness developed within

[8] The future of philosophy largely depends on its integration into this market cycle. As a self-serving inventory of ideas, it cannot hope for financial support, but if it manages to develop ideas that inspire or justify political enterprises, or provides tangible ethical guidance for individuals acting amidst the chaos of everyday life, it may yet become part of the cycle of consumed symbols and values.

therapy under professional supervision, and as people become willing to pay for the professionally guided cultivation of their self-knowledge, a market for this can gradually emerge, meaning that philosophy may once again be deemed necessary.[9] We can thus see that today the utility or value of any classical intellectual framework or mode of knowledge is not determined by whether it brings happiness to a few isolated individuals, but by whether its tenets possess market exchange value.

In the eclectic world of material and spiritual consumption, it is best to forget the notion of a unified definition of consumption or the ideal of blissful consumption. In a technologically controlled world, it becomes increasingly difficult to generate intense pleasure through material means. Even a supply of a mental nature fails to meet the growing demand for happiness. Naturally, the expansion of the consumption sphere is aided by the fifty-odd (vacuous) television channels, monotonous channel surfing, and aimless browsing on the internet. All of this fosters a sense of hopelessness in the individual, whose despair is immediately addressed by psychologists and doctors recommending miracle products.

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9 See Lou Marinoff's relevant overview, who is a founding member of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association, in this regard. He notes that in the United States and Germany, people pay to clarify their axiological doubts regarding family, relationships, work, hopes, and expectations during pre-announced thematic group discussions held in public, easily accessible venues, and – based on the Socratic method – bring to consciousness the values lying deep within their souls.

Let us forget that the growth of supply leads to direct physical and mental prosperity; after the latest stage of consumption development, we can doubt the blissful effects of materialism just as much as Nietzsche was sceptical of the ethical universalism of modernity. “The hyper-consumerist society and intellectual, moral, and aesthetic barbarism are one and the same.”[10] But only because personal satisfaction has been overly commercialized at the moment it became tied to material conditions. It is conceivable that once we no longer equate happiness with consumption and the pursuit of novelty, the power of mass consumption will diminish.

At the same time, it would be naive to expect some form of illusory ethical fulfilment from the complete restriction of needs.[11] Total asceticism is now unimaginable, and limiting the level of desire to easily satisfiable wishes is unnatural. If lack can cause suffering, we cannot expect any form of definitive salvation from lasting fulfilment. This is well illustrated by Pascal Bruckner, who quotes one of the slogans from the May ‘68 movements: “We don’t want a world where the guarantee of not dying of starvation brings the risk of dying of boredom.”[12] As long as virtues and pleasures can be articulated through personal insights, and the marketing “salvific” strategies flicker at the edges of all reasoning, the questions of consumption and happiness will remain open.

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10 Lipovetsky: op. cit., p. 312.

11 Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, whom Ricoeur calls “the masters of suspicion”, demonstrated that man is essentially an instinctual being, whose repressed desires lead to psychological disturbances. With this, we return to the idea of consumption playing a therapeutic role.

12 Bruckner: *Euforia perpetuă*, p. 43.

We could ask, with the excerpt from Kundera's *Slowness* that follows: "Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared? Ah, where have they gone, the amblers of yesteryear? Where have they gone, those loafing heroes of folk song, those vagabonds who roam from one mill to another and bed down under the stars? Have they vanished along with footpaths, with grasslands and clearings, with nature? There is a Czech proverb that describes their easy indolence by a metaphor: 'They are gazing at God's windows.' A person gazing at God's windows is not bored; he is happy. In our world, indolence has turned into having nothing to do, which is a completely different thing: a person with nothing to do is frustrated, bored, is constantly searching for the activity he lacks."[13]

[13] Kundera: *Lassúság*, p. 6.

4. Our Selfhood in the Labyrinth of Consumption

4.1. Reinterpretation of an Existential Relationship

Consumption, in traditional interpretations, emerges as the counterpoint to production. It is typically understood – from a strategic perspective – as a relationship that is economically controlled and well-defined, established between humans and the world, in which the individual temporarily resolves a state of lack through the use or internalization of consumable goods.

If the consumption of material (and sometimes spiritual) goods facilitates the alleviation of an individually experienced sense of lack, then the void that occurs in the realm of utilitarian goods must automatically be counterbalanced and eliminated through production. Interpretations that view consumption as a mechanism for controlling elemental states of lack, and thus set it against production, have framed the two phenomena in a contradictory yet complementary relationship. In this dynamic, the cost of alleviating a sense of lack is the loss of the very object of desire: "you can't eat your cake and have it too" – or as the Hungarian saying goes, "you can't both save the goat and keep the cabbage". In the

following pages, I will refine this simplistic interpretation of consumption.

The psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi also describes the naïve conception of man and the world related to the ontogenesis of production. "Perhaps the best way to define who we are as individuals is through the tools of our occupation. Karl Marx was right: man primarily creates his existence through productive effort. In other words, for the majority of adults, the creation of the means for physical survival through a specific way of life is the most fundamental activity, one that demands the greatest investment of psychic energy. Productive activity reveals much about a worker's originality, abilities, perseverance, and limitations. The information we receive about the self through productive activity becomes a central element of the self as a whole. Smith, Miller, Thatcher, Taylor – in most languages, it is common for a person to derive their identity from their occupation. 'Smith' was a person who owned an anvil and knew how to shape glowing iron with tongs and a hammer, while 'Miller' turned massive stones with wind or water to grind grain between them. Man defined and cultivated his individuality through the tools that enabled his existence."[1]

In this section, I aim to dismantle the naive interpretation of the relationship between humanity and the world. I seek to demonstrate that selfhood, or the Self, is no longer determined by production in the Marxist sense; rather, it serves as a terminal of boundless consumption, where object

[1] Csíkszentmihályi and Halton: *Tárgyaink tükrében*, p. 143.

and subject, thingness and the Self merge. Just as modern communication tools blend the self with materiality, the subject with the object, and the inner with the outer, this kind of promiscuity presents a new paradigm of schizophrenia in our time.[2]

The consequences of the naivety of the relationship between humanity and the world, along with its superficial simplicity that fails to recognize the complexity of the actual situation, and the misunderstandings related to the concept of consumption:

1. Consumption serves existential needs. The cessation of a state of lack presupposes the consumption or use of the object in question.

2. If consumption aims to satisfy basic needs, it finds its absolute finality in the elimination of a state of lack. Consumption, which listens to the rationality of existence, has a purpose and therefore cannot be an unlimited phenomenon.

3. If we understand the state of lack as an unnatural condition for humans, its elimination, whether for a shorter or longer duration, is equivalent to happiness. If consumption brings happiness, then, according to this logic, possessing more, more exceptional, rarer, and more expensive things only enhances satisfaction.

We could deny these three clichés with a single statement: consumption is essentially unlimited, amoral, and strays far from its original existential purpose, offering no guarantee of happiness; however, in the following sections, I

[2] See the chapter titled *Our Selfhood at the Fragile Border of (Ab)normality*.

will seek to substantiate my thesis through a brief outline of the phenomenology of consumption.

First, referring again to Baudrillard, I argue that the consumable object, as the object of desire, emerges from the abstract inaccessibility of thingness and is transformed into personal graspability, while its ontological aspect becomes subordinate to its semiotic relevance. In today's consumption relationships, the symbolic function of things takes center stage. Accordingly, the postmodern consumer defines their essence – that is, their existence – less through the internalization of the material value of things and more through the mental appropriation of their symbolic value. My argument then proceeds to analyze the social profile of *homo consumericus*. I highlight the diverse phenomena within the society of liberated desires – the interplay of rationality and sensuality, boundless hedonism and philanthropic actions – to ultimately emphasize the self-organizing mode of existence in contemporary consumption relationships. This mode has drifted away from socio-economic-existential rationality, within which the consumer subject becomes increasingly subordinated to the symbolic exchange processes.

The autonomisation of consumer phenomena calls into question the ontological status of the subject, which it has attained in modernity. The traditional subject-object relationship, which once characterized consumption subordinate to the conditions of existence, is now replaced by the individual-system relation. In this regard, we may rightfully ask: to what extent and in what sense is consumption, freed from existential ties and subjected not to

human needs but to the demands of a system, responsible for the socio-cultural dignity of the consumer subject?

4.2. The Metamorphosis of Thingness and Insatiability

At the centre of Baudrillard's concept of consumption stands the image of a person who relates to the material world in a novel way, yet is less conscious of this relationship itself. For Baudrillard, consumption detaches from its strictly existential function and emerges as a defining aspect of human existence and the relationship between man and objects. The notion of the consumer as a living being that absorbs and appropriates external raw material resources is misguided. Today's consumer attitude can no longer be characterized by the internalization of natural resources in accordance with biologically conditioned needs. Here, however, I am less concerned with the quantitative-relational aspect of consumption and more with the specific *existential relationship* that arises between the consumer and the consumed object.

In the following section, I will argue that, beyond its existentialist functionality, consumption reveals ontological aspects that place the consuming subject in a distinctive existential relationship with the consumed object. This relationship is noteworthy because it can no longer be characterized by the subject-object dynamic typical of modernity's conceptual framework and modes of thought. Instead, it must be discussed in terms of the relativism of the consumer's identity and existential needs.

Baudrillard offers the following systematic definition of consumption: "We can understand consumption as a *characteristic feature of our industrial society*, provided that we once and for all liberate it from its current interpretation – the process of satisfying needs." Consumption "is *not a passive appropriation and absorption* that stands in opposition to the active modality of production", but rather *an active form of relation* (not only to things but also to the community and the world), a systematic activity and a modality of global response *upon which our entire cultural system is built*."[3] This comprehensive definition could serve as the motto for the current subsection. My argument will rely on three fundamental ideas: 1. Consumption must be understood in light of the present cultural situation, as it is a defining factor; 2. It must be definitively separated from the conditions of subsistence; 3. It should be understood as a mode of existence that profoundly shapes the individual's relationship with their peers and the external world. Consequently, consumption is a crucial determinant of apperception, the demand for happiness, and the motivational scale.

First, I will focus on the first two remarks, situating the problem of consumption within a metaphysical framework. Later, I will undertake a psychoanalytical and sociological analysis of the illusion of happiness that emerges in relation to consumption.

The concept of consumption traced back to its ontological roots liberates the fact of consumption from its

3 Baudrillard: *Sistemul obiectelor*, p. 130 (Emphasis added by me).

objectualist connotations. Baudrillard's perspective is based on the following paradigm: things and products are merely instruments of needs, but they are far from being the targets of consumption. Purchasing, desire, and the alleviation of states of lack belong to the realm of elementary needs, yet they have little to do with "consumption". By this, as we have already indicated, we mean the *relationship* that can be and is being established between people who produce and seek to satisfy their needs and the objects of the phenomenal world. Therefore, we leave the questions of "who consumes what and how much" untouched in their economic and sociological implications, directing our attention to the social dimension and mode of manifestation in which these objects become signs and are interpreted as such within a relatively coherent discourse. In a consumer society,[4] objects move away from being the general objects of desire and enter the subjective realm of reality understood and recorded as signs. Naturally, in the world of products perceived as signs, the consumer subject also appears merely as a sign in the eyes of other consumers.[5]

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4 The term "consumer society" began to be used in 1920 but only became popular in the latter half of the last century. Initially, its meaning was not clarified; it was understood merely as quantitative consumption rather than being regarded as a fundamental characteristic of our society. Several theorists assumed that mass consumption would lose its force by the turn of the century.

5 A vivid example of the symbolization of consumability is illustrated by the transformation of certain products (luxury goods) into status symbols. Once these products cease to satisfy direct, biological needs, they become symbols of their owner's privileged status and give rise to the emergence of an independent luxury industry that produces not goods, but signs.

The interpretation of objects as signs is not an abstract semiotic phenomenon here; rather, it is one of the interpretive processes that directly determine economic mechanisms. Ultimately, a product's economic and social value depends on its sign-like qualities. The pleasure or utility goods that emerge in the public sphere of the market circulation of products cannot be classified within the category of quantitatively understood consumption. The totality of things that can be quantitatively grasped does not constitute the sphere of the object of consumption; it merely serves as an ontic prerequisite.

Furthermore, consumption should not be understood as a material practice or a form of vital engagement. It qualitatively differs from the totality of owned and enjoyed/used things. Therefore, the phenomenology of consumption is incomprehensible when viewed from the ontic presence of the goods we possess, as well as from the perspective of their purposes that lie hidden behind their coexistence. The phenomenon of consumption reveals its essence in terms of the meaningful substance of consumability: "the virtual totality of things and messages established within

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The positioning of signs on the individual's motivational scale follows a logic that is entirely different from that of biologically conditioned needs. As a result, their economic value becomes relativized, and goods become theoretically uncontrollable. As soon as someone pays for absolute exclusivity, the product ceases to function as an instrument aimed at consumption and instead embodies the absolutized value of an exceptional ownership, reflecting the uniqueness of the individual. This value is maximized based on how much a particular person is willing to pay for it in a given situation. Thus, the price of many luxury goods is determined by their symbolic value for specific individuals.

a more or less coherent discourse […] the activity of systematically manipulating signs."[6]

In a systematically manifesting world of signs, the consumer subject faces novel interpretive challenges that were unknown prior to the emergence of the consumer society. Before anyone can assess the pleasure-generating potential of a given object, they encounter its symbolic value. The object, grasped and internalized through its symbolic value, loses its original exteriority. Things represented at the level of the symbolic actually lift the objects of pleasure out of their material isolation, integrating the otherwise inert, vacuous objects into the cycle of consumption. Once an object becomes consumable, in the sense of its essential usage, it is subject to modes of depletion and disappearance, making it vulnerable to the threat of obsolescence. In this context, we may rightfully ask: what happens to the consumed object? Does it irrevocably lose its physical presence, or does it preserve some aspect of its ontic quality, which ensures its role in sustaining further processes of production?

These questions do not arise so explicitly in the cited Baudrillardian text, yet they provide a thought-provoking approach to the problematic nature of consumption as it manifests in material depletion. If the seemingly boundless nature of consumption leads to a steady decline in the appropriable realm of the material world, to what extent is the production of "something from something" still possible? It becomes clear why the economic-industrial world was

6 Baudrillard: *Sistemul obiectelor*, p. 130.

compelled to introduce the *world of plastic* in an effort to bridge the gap between the limitations of production and the boundlessness of consumption.

The concept of the "world of plastic" can be compared to Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum. Both refer to an artificially constructed reality, one that people, living in a world dominated by images, more readily internalize, becoming inclined to mentally substitute the artificial and the reproduced for the original. The artificial world offers simple, inexpensive, and easily internalized alternatives for potential consumers. Within its sphere, one finds hardly any unnecessary or useless objects; everything is tailored to the specific needs of the users. The qualitative criterion for consumer goods is determined by the level of demand exploited by marketing tools and endlessly varied to meet consumer expectations.

The process of things becoming symbolic can best be assessed through the analysis of the phenomenon of options related to artificial (or virtual) products. In this world, almost exclusively artificial desires develop, which in turn generate further artificial needs. The relationship with the artificial world inevitably impacts interpersonal relationships. The substitution of the natural with the artificial, while economically efficient, also conceals authentic modes of existence. In this artificial world, the individual cannot be their natural self unless they have definitively abandoned the needs arising from a natural mode of existence.

The sphere of artificial consumption comes into effect where its existentially conditioned counterpart ceases to exist.

Once the aim is no longer to satisfy our naturally given needs but rather to consume phenomena that reveal themselves as signs, the supply can no longer be limited to the exposition of natural resources in two significant respects. On the one hand, the pressing needs of contemporary individuals are not anchored in the acquisition of sustenance derived from nature. On the other hand, it is impossible to satisfy the exponentially growing level of demand through the exploitation of natural resources. Thus, we can see that the production targeting artificial products is driven by both the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of consumption.

It is likely that the dominance of artificial (i.e., man-made) products on the scale of consumption would not have gained such prominence had humanity remained within the boundaries of existentially defined needs. Since the quantitative and qualitative satisfaction of existential needs by natural products is a fundamental characteristic of nature's rhythm – after all, nature provides only what is fundamentally necessary – these products would have been practically sufficient to cover "normal" consumption. However, in a world where consumption has become an end in itself and a mode of existence, it became impossible to satisfy non-natural aspirations with the things provided by nature. In this sense, the emergence of the artificial world of production was driven by the need to meet socially regulated demands that exceed the existential sphere. An artificial scale of needs can only be related to an equally artificial reality.

4.3. Limitless Consumption and Inescapable Scarcity

After outlining the contrast between the *artificial* and the *original*, we can return to a review of Baudrillard's ideas. Once things have been transformed into signs and take over the sphere of needs, the individual becomes entangled in an uncontrollable conflict between desire and the object of desire. A relationship with things emerges, where it is no longer the things themselves that we "use" but rather the relationship we establish with them. The phenomenon of consumption can hardly be discussed apart from our ever-changing, or more precisely, diminishing relationship with the world.[7] "The relationship is no longer experienced; it is absorbed and abstracted into that sign-object in which it is consumed."[8]

According to Baudrillard, the internal structure of social relations is determined by the complex strategies that enable consumption. Today, things appear less through their original, authentic ontological relevance, as their status results from the artificial representations offered by advertisements that showcase and describe them. The significance of an object is no longer reflected in its natural essence but rather in the criteria of consumability that unfold within social relations. Consumability qualifies and selects objects. Once they cease to appear as indifferent objects, they are organized into opposing categories of things endowed with genuine existence (economic and social relevance) and those that have become superfluous, having lost their existential value.

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7 The essence of the entire economic mechanism can be traced back to the idea of relation, in which usable things can represent the objects of desire.

8 Baudrillard: *Sistemul obiectelor*, p. 131.

In the world of consumption, the classical, metaphysical autonomy of objects ceases to exist. An entity is considered real for me to the extent that it *personalizes itself* in alignment with my level of need. In nearly all cases, the consumed reality is a personalized sphere. While in the case of existentially determined consumption, the interiorized object was foreign and indifferent to my person – its individuality could only cease to exist during consumption, transforming into something for another – in our postmodern culture, a product's value/reliability lies in its heightened sense of personal relevance within the realm of advertising. Whether this personalization is realistic and necessary is another matter altogether.

The personalization of impersonal objects parallels the depersonalization of inherently human-conceived values. It is worth noting that this phenomenon is an undeniable characteristic of our individualized and isolated culture. The harder individuals find it to communicate, the more acute the demand for material reality becomes. The relationship with objects becomes direct and intimate, serving as a substitute for relationships with similar peers, automatically "personalizing" the possessed item. Based on this, we can re-evaluate the Aristotelian assertion that a friend is a faithful reflection of our character. Today's mass consumer can be judged not by their peers but by the quality of the possessions they hold. The consumed reality evaluates and selects. Once consumption strays from its role in providing the conditions of existence, it begins to align with socially conditioned needs that dictate image, status, and spheres of belonging.

In this regard, we can observe two types of personalization of the consumed reality. On one hand, there is the self-image associated with products that conform to socially regulated demand levels; when a person selects a product, they align it with their own cultural profile. On the other hand, the uniqueness rooted in the personalization of the products fulfils *a priori* expectations of individuality. Personalized objects are perceived as more reliable and original even before any related experiences. Not to mention how many people base their identities on these objects. Thus, we have once again returned to the signifying function of things.

In the consumed relation, the status of products becomes questionable. Following Baudrillard, we can view consumption as a *totalizing idealist practice*, the significance of which far exceeds the relationships established with objects and other consumers, "extending to all registers of history, communication, and culture".[9]

If consumption is merely a cultural phenomenon, does it not become a self-serving luxury, unnecessary and distanced from everyday life necessities, as a significant chapter of culture? Or, conversely, does it not bear the responsibility for the quality of people's cultural expressions?[10] The answer, in

[9] Ibid., p. 132.

[10] The precise answer requires clarifying the scope of the cultural sphere. If we understand culture as the totality of human creations that have distanced themselves from the natural, we can regard consumption, which has detached itself from the existential level, as a cultural phenomenon. The relationship between the two becomes even more apparent when we consider that cultural products intended for

this case, is provided by conjunctive rather than disjunctive logic. Consumption is a fundamental element of the cultural sphere, encompassing not only the entirety of interiorisable artificial products but also the collective signs from which people understand themselves. As the interpreted sign – the internalized cultural sphere –loses its novelty and interest, humanity relies on the perpetually renewing significance of the world of products, which inevitably leads to the creation of a *consumed culture*.

The totality of things represented by their sign value can be regarded as the idealist vocabulary of culture. Once we synthesize things within an abstract semantic context, we replace our original ontological mode of existence with an idealist consumption strategy that unfolds at the mental level. In an idealized world, everything is boundless and relative. Objects lose their natural purpose and stable value.[11] Intensive consumption becomes the arena for the conflict of idealized mental options. In this sense, it takes on qualitative rather than merely quantitative aspects. If it were solely quantitative in nature, the available quantity of products would become irreparably exhausted at a certain point, and humanity, as the "nourishing" entity, could theoretically reach a maximum

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consumption exist solely as signs of the cultural practices of a specific consumer category.

11 We need only consider the significant fluctuations in real estate prices due to geographic location, neighbourhood, insurance companies' policies, current economic conditions, and demand. This is one of the best pieces of evidence that the price of things is constituted on an ideological level, independent of the object's (now forgotten) intrinsic value.

saturation stage beyond which no state of deficiency would arise.[12]

Consumption, however, is *limitless*. According to Maslow's (naive) logic, consumption alleviates conscious states of lack. Based on this premise, we could "address" the fulfilment of certain needs for a long time or even permanently. In reality, however, the opposite is true: the more we consume, the more intensely we experience certain states of lack – and the more we possess, the more intense our feelings of deprivation become. This is because we appeal not to the physically defined *functionality* of things but to their thought-interpreted *ideality*. "If consumption seems insurmountable, it is only because it has become a completely idealistic practice, one that, beyond a certain point, has no connection to the principles of reality or the fulfilment of needs. […] Moderating consumption or determining the scale of needs that could normalize it can only seem like an absurd or naive morality."[13]

We can interpret boundless consumption as a deviation of our postmodern culture. In it, we witness the destabilization of people's sense of reality, the unprincipled manifestation of misunderstood individualism, and the extension of natural needs into an idealized realm. Behind consumption liberated

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[12] The lack of saturation is only valid in the absolute sense when it comes to the consumption of idealized things. A state of saturation can be easily achieved with mere survival items, but for products that hold ideological value, one cannot say, "this is enough". Behind the theoretical impossibility of saturation – alongside emotional frustrations and social conflicts – there are factors that propel progress forward.

[13] Baudrillard: *Sistemul obiectelor*, p. 133.

from quantitative control, we can discern immanent idols in the form of products, societal values, or aspirations unfolding on an idealistic plane.

Baudrillard's perspective on this matter can easily be accused of cultural pessimism and scepticism toward sober human moderation. If consumption has truly detached itself from its existential role and no longer reflects a real scale of needs but instead responds to an uncontrollable inner void, it must then compensate for the echoing emptiness of the internal dimension by filling it from the "outside". As the quality and external proliferation of consumer goods increases, we witness, in parallel, the relativisation and weakening of our psychological sense of reality.

A thought-provoking dilemma arises: is this a psychologically justifiable desire for happiness or a misguided craving for totality? Can we detect a postmodern, profane social cult emerging amidst the seemingly endless focus on material consumption? Or perhaps what manifests in all of this is the isolated individual's sense of control over material possessions? We could conclude our analysis by recalling the final statement from the Baudrillard work at the centre of our discussion: consumption is unstoppable, "because the lack on which it is based is irremediable".[14]

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[14] Ibid.

5. The Faces of Selfhood and Otherness in the Context of Identity

The phenomenology of selfhood does not settle for the reductionist definitions offered by classical concepts of man. These approaches viewed the essence of man in terms of rationality, morality, createdness, or the potential for moral-aesthetic perfection. Defining human essence according to unified, monolithic criteria now seems one-sided and outdated. Cultural diversification, the pluralized political-social system, and the simultaneous prevalence of multilingualism have directly and inevitably confronted us with otherness and foreignness. Moreover, we can say that we primarily understand our identity through the experience of otherness.

The issue of otherness largely escaped the attention of modernity's paradigms. The modern mindset, which evolved from the scholastic theological perspective, is inherently exclusivist, intolerant, and radical. By thinking in terms of precise value categories, it excluded the possibility of opposing values, solutions, and alternatives. However, in a culture without alternatives, there can be no discussion of otherness.

In the following pages, I will argue that our sense of self is not a closed, hermetic reality that can be fully defined by epistemological, ontological, or anthropological categories.

Rather, it is an open, dynamic world with the potential for change. Furthermore, I will highlight a relevant paradigm from contemporary phenomenological thought: in our postmodern world, otherness is not viewed as a separate sphere opposed to my selfhood, but rather, my identity is conceived in the possibilities of encountering and engaging with alterity. In this sense, the issue arises as to what extent otherness retains its rootedness in separateness from me, and whether we can still speak of a distinct sense of identity within such a humanistic consubstantiality. The ontically and ontologically assumed nature of embraced difference paves the way for a new form of identity constitution. The uniformity and internal cohesion of identity become questionable, as the interplay of difference with self-identity raises the suspicion of a schizophrenic self.

In the following, we will draw our conclusions regarding the phenomenological constitution of otherness based on the interpretation of relevant ideas from Husserl, Baudrillard, Guillaume, and Lévinas.

5.1. Historical Instances of Otherness

Alterity, through our everyday experience, is to be interpreted as an ontic and ontological moment of elementary self-understanding and the differentiation of selfhood from external possibilities. Despite its elementary and primary nature, it is far from being an alien or indifferent reality in relation to self-definition; rather, it should be treated as an aspect intimately connected with our own self.

From the perspective of the history of philosophy, the question of otherness has followed perhaps the most diverse path of all philosophical issues. In Greek cosmogony, it was inherently excluded due to fundamental metaphysical considerations. The Greeks, who discussed the relationship between the One and the Many, always favoured the One, relegating multiplicity and variation either to the realm of appearances or subordinating them to the holistically approached idea of the One. That which was transient or deviated from the norm of unity lacked a substantial basis of existence and, as such, was deemed unworthy of philosophical reflection.

Aristotle was already less faithful to the unity theory of the pre-Socratics and Plato. In his *Metaphysics*, he takes the first step in Western thought – marked by a forgetting of Being (as Heidegger would later say) – from Being itself to beings. When he writes that we can speak of being in four different senses, he implicitly refers to the heterogeneous nature of existence. Nevertheless, for centuries, Western philosophy did not account for the evident reality of otherness.

In the monolingual, hermetically structured Greek civilization, there was no place for otherness. The Greek–barbarian dichotomy held more ethical and cultural significance than phenomenological importance. Medieval Christianity not only neglected the question of otherness but actively excluded any perspectives diverging from official dogma with its fundamentalist monotheistic doctrine.[1]

[1] Judging by a different logic, it was precisely these closed civilizations that most visibly integrated otherness –albeit in a negative sense, as a set of

Modernity was no more lenient toward otherness. In its exclusivist rhetoric, built on grand narratives, it presented categories with claims of exclusivity that were alien to one another and, by their very nature, could not encompass each other.

The neglect of otherness within various cultural *topoi* is not so straightforward. More precisely, within these, we can only identify the absence of a well-defined experience of otherness. We cannot speak of embraced alterity as long as Western self-consciousness classified it under the category of the "radically different". In the value categories based on oppositional pairs in modernity, it is incorrect to regard a category as merely the counterpart of another because it lacks the specific consubstantiality that allows for the establishment of these ontological differences. Thus, in Christian culture, humanity could not be seen as the counterpart of God, just as in modernity, good was not treated as the "otherness" of evil, but rather simply regarded as its opposite. The disjunction between humanity and God, as well as between good and evil, represents a radical contradiction, and therefore did not allow for the validity of the value categories associated with the conception of one member while being applicable to the other. Otherness arises where the active-creative consciousness becomes aware of itself as a relational being through the projection of itself into the other. Thus, otherness is always based on the projection of my selfhood in relation to the other,

phenomena entirely divergent from their essence and norms, which they sought to eliminate.

in their words and actions, and on the recognition of my essence within the identity of the other.

Alterity is rooted in my selfhood. In every instance, it is a reality that stems from my essence or at least manifests itself at the level of self-understanding, forming an elemental component of my self-knowledge and even my entire identity. Whether we approach this origin ethically, like Lévinas, or from a socio-ontological perspective, like Baudrillard, is another matter entirely.

Our forthcoming inquiry will be based on the following idea: modernity was not only incapable of addressing the question of otherness but also increasingly distanced itself from its essence.[2] The diversification of cultural possibilities, encounters with foreign civilizations, and the rise of abstract thought did indeed confront the European man with the Other, but they failed to elucidate the phenomenality of *otherness*. In other words, Western man – up until Nietzsche – was unable to comprehend the projection of his own selfhood in the identity of the Other.

5.2. The Explicit Occurrence of Otherness in Nietzsche

In 20th-century philosophy, the issue of otherness gradually became a central problem. While the question predominantly preoccupied French phenomenology, it first emerged in Nietzsche's thought, albeit in a different context. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche interprets our true identity

[2] My argument is based on the paradigms of the essay collection of Baudrillard and Guillaume: *Figuri ale alterității*.

starting from the concept of the "mask". By his own admission, "the problem of the actor has disquieted me the longest".[3] The actor is not a foreign figure, but rather the companion of my everyday identity, the Other dwelling within me, through whom I can better understand myself. This Other holds a mask for me, which, when worn, reveals me to myself.

The foreignness residing within us may have never found such resonance in the history of ideas as it did with Nietzsche. The "mask" reflects the hypostases of the spirit and its developmental moments in the case of unified yet multi-faceted individuals. It is sufficient to refer here to the development of the spirit of the "strong-willed man" as portrayed in the Zarathustra myth, where it reaches its reality through the hypostases of the "camel", the "lion", and the "child". However, his reality contains an innate, essential potential. The spirit could not traverse this path divided into three stages if its inherent identity did not already include the potential developmental levels of all three stages. The metaphysics of the self-surpassing man would stand on weak ground if the "herd man", represented by the metaphor of the "camel", did not possess the possibility of evolving into the "child".

What conclusion can we draw from Nietzsche's progression of the spirit? Reflecting on the metaphor of the "mask", we may infer the mirror-like nature of selfhood and the ontological compulsion for the unfolding of the otherness

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3 See Bertram: *Nietzsche*, p. 139–159.

embedded within it. Man is, more accurately, what he can become through the exponential unfolding of the potentials lying deep within his selfhood. This conclusion, however, holds not only existentialist but also phenomenological significance. The "mask" is the *other* within me, who can reveal itself at any moment, who places obstacles in the path of my self-understanding, and through whom I ultimately come to comprehend myself. My selfhood is accessible only through the labyrinth of the otherness that resides within me. Therefore, a consistently pursued self-understanding must embrace the possibility of becoming other.

Modernity's aversion to otherness was paradoxical even within pluralist Europe. The reduction of the human dimension to opposing ontological and anthropological categories distanced our selfhood from embracing its inherent otherness. Insofar as Western individuals conceived of themselves in the rigid opposition of *us* versus *them*, they distanced themselves from recognizing the qualitative aspects of alterity within themselves and from understanding the potential heterogeneity of their own selfhood. The recognition of the multifaceted nature of our identity is a merit of postmodernity, which builds upon diversification. By reversing the ancient metaphysical paradigm of "unity in diversity", the category of "diversity inherent in unity" to some extent dismantles the modern conception of a singular, historically given, and relatively unchanging selfhood. But what is the outcome? A harmonious selfhood – or a multifaceted, schizophrenic consciousness that hardly has the capacity to harmonize the mosaic reflections of otherness? The

phenomenology of alterity may provide possible answers to this question.

5.3. The Phenomenological Presuppositions of Otherness

In the introduction to *Figures de l'altérité*, Marc Guillaume states that otherness has become an obsessive theme in contemporary European thought. Its popularity is undoubtedly rooted in the everyday experience of confronting foreignness, difference, and xenophobia, which appears in an almost propagandistic context within social philosophies. The genesis of the question of alterity is linked to the theoretical acceptance of otherness, which is misunderstood yet responsibly related to our selfhood.

The emergence of this issue in European philosophical self-understanding can be seen as a turning point. While philosophers in the exclusive centuries of modernity approached the truth through introspection, contemporary thinkers strive to grasp the given state of humanity through the comparative interpretation of *different* cultural *topoi* and *diversity*.

This can also be regarded as a new perspective, a genuine hermeneutical turn in our Western tradition. While earlier thinkers relegated otherness – often driven by xenophobic impulses – to the realm of foreignness, contemporary thought seeks to understand ourselves through the assimilation of the originality and uniqueness inherent in the existence of the Other. *Foreignness* and *diversity* cease to be represented as

alienating or differentiating categories and instead become hermeneutically fertile factors.

Propositions related to alterity often must contend with the category of radical otherness. The question of otherness is far from being exhausted by diversity; rather, it hypostatizes the Other as a personalized concretization of alterity. Behind every Other (*autre*) lies the essence of otherness (*autrui*).[4] The subjugation of the Other to the massifying and levelling effect of otherness is anchored as a reflex of our Western tradition of forgetfulness of Being. Having previously used the concept of "otherness" in a general ontological sense, without establishing specific qualitative distinctions, I now turn my attention to the Other as an entity independent of me, yet playing a role in the constitution of my selfhood.

At this point, we can supplement and refine the earlier assertion: while modernity acknowledged otherness, it was incapable of thematizing the autonomy of the Other. We might also say that modernity subordinated the individuality of the Other to the authority of otherness. It is true that alterity is, in essence, a consequence and recognition of the intellectual achievements of the modern era, but it could not unfold

[4] In the French dictionary definition, *autrui* refers to the entirety of people different from ourselves or, more simply, "others". The semantic distinction between the word *autrui* and *autre* is not clear-cut. The Romanian translation of the cited volume does not differentiate between the two terms, as both are translated using the words *altul* or *celălalt*. However, understanding Baudrillard's and Guillaume's texts requires some level of differentiation in the nuances of meaning. It is worth noting that *autrui* does not have a plural form and is only applicable to people.

thematically because it emerged from the outset in relation to the reduction that stifles being.

The modern reduction of the Other to otherness is more than a mere conceptual shift. We must see more in this repression than the moderns' attitude toward the novel. Here, the intellectual understanding of the identity of the Other directly constitutes the historically undesirable dominance of otherness. Due to the influence of various metanarratives and global-scale political ideologies, the Other is degraded to the status of my enemy, the opponent of power, and an incomprehensible otherness. Ideological conflicts have created an insurmountable chasm among people that has rendered any form of communion impossible from the outset.

What happens to the Other in a heterogeneous, pluralistic, postmodern culture? Does the Other truly find its rightful social and ethical status in the postmodern era, which prides itself on tolerance and openness to diversity? Can our society, fragmented into subcultures, even allow for the discovery of the values inherent in the concrete person of the Other – or, on the contrary, will the Other become a victim of the indifferentiation of axiological coexistence? We can, for the time being, only reflect on these questions. Our response, however, is likely to be negative if we interpret the individual living in the age of anonymous openness as a victim of spectral culture – following Baudrillard – regarding them as a being that has lost the capacity to open up to otherness.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre speaks of a certain innate impatience and closedness that blocks the paths to recognizing the Other. On the one hand, "hell is other people", but on the

other, Sartre acknowledges that the journey toward self-identity presupposes stages of recognizing the Other. Even the most isolated dimensions of our self, removed from the social sphere, cannot escape the directly manifest aspects of alterity. As Guillaume writes, in the social sphere, we are constantly confronted with the faces of otherness as they emerge in the forms of crime, economic and political challenges, and cultural divides. In our post-industrial world, the persistent reality of pathology, religious conflicts, and technological terror complicates the ethical boundaries of accepting the Other. In many cases, the occurrences of alterity that border on abnormality naturally call into question the ethical foundations of our attitude toward the mere phenomenality of the Other. Once our faith in the trustworthiness of the Other is shaken, we categorize otherness, following Sartre, into the realm of threatening alterity.

The expansion of Western cultural idioms, the absorption of once-unknown, exotic stereotypes, leads to the acceptance of models considered inferior to European norms. The culturalisation of the Other – beyond its economic dimensions – simultaneously symbolizes inequality and progress, as well as the sacrifice of still-unknown factors on the altar of knowledge.[5] If, under the influence of political, economic, or military factors, I reduce the Other to mere otherness, I risk projecting my own otherness onto the essence of the Other. Alterity, in essence, is always the projection of my own self onto the ego of the Other. This reveals a significant error in

5 See Guidieri: *L'abandonance des pauvres*, p. 189.

metaphysical thinking related to this issue, which opposed alterity to self-identity by treating it as a distinct quality relative to a given identity.[6]

The theoretical suspension of perceiving alterity as an uncomfortable foreignness can be expected to eliminate the alienating and essence-distorting function of otherness. According to Guillaume, the theoretical connection between alterity and estrangement can be dissolved by moving from the authority of the *Autre* to the world of *Autrui*. This is nothing other than a process of humanization, which assigns a well-defined place and role to humans in the world. We can see, therefore, that the question of otherness leads to a strong definition of the essence of the "Human".[7] The significance of alterity embedded in my identity leads to the ethical concept of the "human". As soon as my identity is constituted by the presence of the Other, the attitude underlying my relationship with others reflects the essence of my selfhood. Thus, it is no coincidence that the roots of the concepts of *alterity* and *altruism* are shared: "Altruism is the moral value that should

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6 The modern misunderstanding of alterity, understood as otherness from my identity, stems from the one-sided application of the rules of classical logic. We hardly begin to understand our selfhood when we transcend the demands of bipolar logic that disrupt the unity of the ontological sphere and, following the Heideggerian model, focus on the logic of Being. This structure does not necessarily position our selfhood in opposition to alterity.

7 Postmodern humanism – if we can speak of such a concept – proceeded in the opposite direction: it developed a weak definition of human nature, denying it the modern axiological and ethical centrality it once held.

enable the shortening, or even the elimination, of the distance between the Self and the Other."[8]

The cultural experience of otherness is so context-dependent that the experience of the Other can even be regarded as a representative cultural *topos*, functioning as a measure of individual openness and tolerance. Every era has carried within it some form of historical experience of otherness. Humanity's stance on alterity has varied across different epochs, races, and nations. Whereas in earlier times the Other was seen as an incommensurable being, irreducible to one's own experiential world, and was treated with either extreme fraternity or xenophobia, our current society conveys an experience more characterized by permissiveness, indifference, and the dilution of valuable otherness in a misinterpreted pluralism.

The breakdown of cultural and communicative barriers has paradoxically delayed the intellectual acceptance of otherness. In fact, it seems that as the space for engaging with the Other expands, openness towards alterity tends to decrease. Taking these considerations into account, we may conclude – along with Baudrillard – that otherness has become a rare phenomenon in our contemporary world.

If we search for the phenomenological idea of otherness, we may realize that alterity is fundamentally an abstraction. We are now unable to grasp otherness in the same way as modern thinkers did. In the context of modern dichotomous thinking, otherness was a qualitative category that could be

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8 Baudrillard and Guillaume: op. cit., p. 11.

delineated and contrasted with a specific quality. Currently, it encompasses the entirety of possible interpretations of the world or, in ontological terms, all those identities that my selfhood can assume at will.

In the realm of open communication, the ontological status of the Other's otherness becomes uncertain. Within the domains of openness, tolerance, and flexible communication, it is precisely our selfhood's unfolding self-understanding in the light of otherness that becomes questionable. While in the past, people regarded dialogue with the Other as a fortunate exit from the ego's self-enclosing mechanism, today, in the world of multifaceted communication, it can be seen as a phenomenon that generates the implosive process of consciousness.[9]

Our current social processes seem to demonstrate that alongside the unfolding of openness to otherness, we are witnessing the internal isolation, emptiness, and the trivialization of qualitative relations of isolated individuals. The paradox of communication looms behind this isolation: the qualitative/technical enrichment of communicative relations leads to the impoverishment of the substantive character of the communicative situation.

In this context, it is worth recalling Baudrillard's perspective that our world,[10] in the age of satellites, shrinks into a comprehensible "globe", where points can be traversed at will, thus hardly holding any more novelty or unknown elements. In such a transparent world, the otherness that is

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[9] See ibid., p. 62–65.

[10] Cf. Baudrillard: *Celălalt prin sine însuşi*, p. 25–27.

distinct from my personal identity loses its inherent value of alienness and its challenging nature.

In the ecstasy of communication, the Other no longer emerges as an independent individual carrying existential messages; rather, it becomes an element of the system bridging the gap between the communicating parties. As soon as the world transforms into a transparent network, the Other loses its *transcendent* nature and shrinks into a trivial node within the unifying *network* of the world. In such a networked world, we cannot speak of authentic otherness, as it becomes an element of a manipulated, electronic system. There cannot be an authentic Other if it can be modelled at any time according to desire through the use of the appropriate technical tools within the playground of manufacturability.[11] Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead" gains new meaning in the ecstasy of communication.

Our world, proud of its openness, has in fact limited the individual's possibilities for perspective. Everyone lives in their own cell.[12] The expanding boundaries have forced individuals into internal emigration or a narrowing into a subjective living space. In this context, the confrontation with the Other is both socially and ethically questionable.

The reduction of alterity from genuine spatial relations to internal, cognitive, brain functions leads to the atrophy of imagination.[13] The transformation of the village into a metropolis and the shrinkage of the previously

[11] Ibid., p. 8.
[12] See ibid., p. 30.
[13] Ibid., p. 32.

incomprehensible world into a traversable sphere have rendered unnecessary the notion of the enchantment of alterity rooted in inaccessibility. One might assert, with a degree of exaggeration, that easily accessible alterity is not true alterity. When establishing a connection with the foreign does not encounter any obstacles, the need to engage with the Other also diminishes. What is the point of striving for the concept of alterity when one only needs to activate the appropriate element of the world wide *web*? The levelling effect of the internet in recent decades seems evident. Communication, virtual reality, and social media have eliminated the Other in the virtual sense of imagination and potentiality: "the Others no longer exist virtually". At the same time – paradoxically – the Other only exists virtually, but in the sense of the artificial, simulacrum world created by digital technology.

As soon as we become unable – despite and alongside a heterogeneous experience of reality – to systematically reinterpret alterity, we can approach the Other as an independent entity in an ethical manner. For example, Lévinas's phenomenology relinquished the demand for a conceptual/discursive interpretation of the Other and suggested a non-theoretical approach to alterity, referring to the immediacy of the Gaze. The Other, assuming the role of a personal, thinking subject, is no longer just one being among many. Here, we might even speak of an I-Thou relationship drawn from Martin Buber's conceptual framework. In this context, the categories of *kinship*, *similarity*, and *distinction* come to the forefront.

The Other is, in itself, either an abstraction or a reality separate from my Self, awaiting ethical concretization through *address*, *goodness*, or *sacrifice*. The Other, revealed in relationship, is always more than an anthropological abstraction; the Other, into whose proximity I may lose myself, or through whose distance I may seek myself in vain, must become *similar* to me. Based on the fundamental similarity between humans, we can say that, standing on the ground of understood otherness, we can bridge the alienating gaps between thinking beings and cultural spheres.

After incorporating alterity into our personal worldview and value system, we can now turn to discussing the role of the Other in the constitution of the ego.

5.4. The Phenomenological Aspects of the Ego/Alter Ego in Lévinas

Whenever the self turns inward, subjecting its own identity to critique, it perceives itself alongside an alter ego – co-existing with it, yet distinct due to its corporeality and spirituality. The primary experience of the self and the other, through distinguishing our personal identity from the other, forms one of the fundamental problems of phenomenological thought. Once I recognize my own ontological separateness from others in perceiving the other, but simultaneously realize the anthropological kinship I share with the other, the question of *otherness* becomes a valuable touchstone for understanding my identity.

Emmanuel Lévinas's personalist phenomenology addresses the role of the other in approaching my own self, and the consequences of the I-Thou dialectic for my selfhood. Lévinasian personalism derives all aspects of the phenomenological unfolding of human existence from the dialectical nature of the I-Thou relationship, including the relationship with God and God's counterpart, the human being, as well as with ontologically established totality, the rationality and institutions of Western culture, and metaphysical dimensions (such as time, death, or transcendence).

Lévinas conceived the relationalist understanding of human essence within the philosophical framework of the individual-world relationship, and specifically, within the I-Thou relationship, without subordinating it to the ontological dimension. Moving beyond the epistemological and metaphysical dualism of the *cogito*, Lévinas did not view the individual as a mere thinking or contemplative being, but rather as an active participant in the flow of life events, existing within a dramatic, dynamic world. In Lévinas's view, what we think and feel forms an immediate and faithful part of our identity.

Every individual is the sole creator, experiencer, and interpreter of their own life story.[14] The personal nature of

[14] Lévinas's thought is not far removed from some key tenets of Sartre's existentialism. If we extract the concepts of absolute freedom and absolute responsibility from Sartre's philosophy of freedom, we are left with the categories of decision, self-interpretation, and the search for identity. The fundamental difference between the two thinkers lies in the impact of the Other on one's identity, and the individual's openness to transcendence. While for Sartre, the Other (or more precisely, others) is

their relationship with the world is experienced through the modalities of being-together. I exist by acknowledging the Other, allowing their presence to define the boundaries of my ego, as confronting alterity often provides not a threat to my identity, but rather a perspective for self-understanding. In Lévinas's philosophy, the notion of the significance of alterity, and its hermeneutic relevance as a point of departure, a path, or a functional tool for interpreting one's selfhood, resurfaces repeatedly. The essence of this idea is that alterity, paradoxically, is the mirror through which I can understand my own being by becoming conscious of differentiation. In Lévinasian phenomenology, the journey toward understanding my selfhood inevitably passes through the stations of alterity – reflected in the gaze of the Other – where, ultimately, I encounter my own otherness.

Human beings are capable of understanding the value of others' uniqueness. The relationship we form or establish with the Other reveals an intention to understand alterity, which transcends the scope of our everyday interpretive abilities. First of all, because any approach to alterity requires not only curiosity but also sympathy and love. Furthermore, we must also recognize that we cannot possess the Other as we might a mere concept. The Other is given in a mode of being, and as such, is significant. Our relationship to alterity unfolds by allowing its fundamental separateness and independence to remain intact. If we strip Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*

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hell, and he aligns with Heidegger in viewing our world as the age of "fleeing gods", denying it any transcendent values, Lévinasian ontology emerges with the hope of rehabilitating authority.

(letting-be) of its metaphysical exclusivity, we can treat it as a touchstone for approaching alterity in the Lévinasian sense.

Levinas's theory of alterity is intriguing from the perspective of the epistemology of selfhood, as it raises questions such as: how can I come to know myself in the reflection of the Other's identity? What does the autonomy of the existent symbolize beyond its ontological dimension? In the process of understanding alterity, how can I transcend the conceptual framework that obscures its essence?

Lévinas approaches these questions by problematizing the gaze, identity, ethics, and the metaphysical reality of death. What does it mean to understand the Other? It means to embrace their gaze and to speak to them. Engaging in dialogue establishes an original relationship that does not subject the recognized originality to the authority of rigid concepts but rather forms the condition for a communion that arises in the proximity of existence. This relationality is necessarily characterized by address. It is impossible to relate to the other while abstracting from the linguistic articulation of our thoughts. Through my explicit thoughts, I enter a world of shared and accepted meanings, becoming a common subject within a community constituted by a shared semantic content.[15]

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[15] The communitarian consequences of the shared semantic dimension radically diverge from the pathological mode of existence discussed here, which denies communion and annihilates communal values. In this regard, the privileged subject of the ontology of alterity can only be a socially balanced selfhood.

The ontological characteristics of our relationship to alterity impose ethical conditions on potential relationships. Alterity is originally subjected to my will. I can deny it, exhibiting violence towards it; I can possess it or observe it. Our intersubjective selfhood is a qualitative consequence of the dynamics of our relationships with the other. The consuming selfhood instinctively desires possession. In a possessive mode of being, the whole entity is, to some extent, already denied. The possessive relationship objectifies, degrading the being to the level of helpless instrumentality, which consequently makes it "mine". From the object we possess, we expect it to yield itself, to be available to us, allowing us to exercise power over it. In contrast, the nature of the person is far removed from the state of being an object. It is true that seeing also has a subordinating and appropriative effect, but once the other assumes the exposure of standing before my gaze, I no longer possess them.[16]

In understanding the openness of alterity, the observed other "does not fully enter into the openness of being in which I am already, as part of my field of freedom. The encounter with me does not occur from the perspective of general being. Everything that originates from it, in general, is assuredly given to my understanding and possession, beginning with being itself. I understand it based on its history, environment,

[16] There is a significant metaphysical difference between the Gaze and observation. The object of the Gaze remains hidden within its ontological dimension, preserving the mysteriousness of its existence that predates conceptual thought. In contrast, the observed being is degraded to an existential entity placed before rational propositions, ontologically exhausted. Even psychology cannot objectify the person.

and customs. What is unintelligible in it is itself, its being. I cannot partially deny it, exhibiting violence towards it, grasping and possessing it in terms of its general existence. The other is the only being for which total denial can be claimed: murder."[17] The negation of the other can be observed as stemming from their proximity to my essence: only a subject with a gaze can be engaged with in the full ontological possibility of the relationship. When I look into the other's eyes, I encounter their essence, the human value embedded in their identity, which I inevitably reflect back onto my own selfhood. I may disregard this value, even in the most radical form of negation. The negated other becomes an extinguished existence, and in their negation, I destroy a certain sphere of my own humanity. However, in the face-to-face encounter, the other cannot be denied. This is why dialogues hold a constitutive value for community.

The experience of the gaze ensures not only the perception of sight but also the experiences of hearing and speaking. While the encounter with the gaze, the confrontation with the authenticity of the other person, neutralizes the destructive impulse aimed at the annihilation of otherness, it simultaneously raises questions about the ontic consequences of perceiving the gaze. How can I appear to myself as a gaze? In what sense do we understand our relationship with the other as a possibility that opens toward totality? Lévinas concludes the line of thought he elaborates in his essay *Is Ontology Fundamental?* – which I have outlined here – with the

[17] Lévinas: *Între noi*, p. 18.

following statement: “The human is only given to a relationship that is alien to power.”[18]

Lévinas, by addressing the problem of the self interpreted as singularity, transcended classical philosophical positions on the self, as well as the Cartesian principles deriving subjectivity from the cogito. The cogito loses its role as the fundamental basis for constituting the self, and instead, the ego is derived from the interplay of discourses emerging within the interactive world of alter egos. However, in relational existence, we can recognize the self as existing in singularity. Thus, “to seek the self as singularity within a totality composed of relationships between singularities, which cannot be subsumed under a single concept, is akin to asking whether a living person has no power to judge the history in which they participate”.[19]

The self understood as singularity brings to the surface the shared reality (values) of individuals existing in ontic separation through the communicative elements of language,[20] reason, and the gaze. For these values to be expressed, they require our openness to alterity, the otherness within us, and our inherent duality. The transcendence of the addressee and the possibility of transcending the closure imposed by language point toward the linguistic communion of persons

18 Ibid., p. 19.

19 Ibid., p. 33.

20 In this context, one can also mention Heidegger’s famous assertion that we do not speak language, but rather speak from it, or “language speaks us”. We are able to do this because we have already heard language beforehand. And what is it that we have heard? The speech of language. See Heidegger: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, p. 243.

existing as singularities. Ontically, we are isolated beings as individuals, yet as speaking beings, we belong to the community of language users. “The self is inexpressible, as the one who speaks in an exceptional way is responsive, responsible. The other, as a purely communicative entity, is not a subject known or categorized, perceived starting from and subordinated to a general concept. The other has a face and refers only to itself.”[21]

In Lévinas, the gaze reveals and interprets. I open myself to the other without risking the emptying of my being in the act of speaking. On the contrary, it is through this that I attain the meaning of my hidden potential within the otherness. The other originally contains me.[22] The symmetrical relationship of content between the communicative parties, in Lévinas’s philosophy of identity, implicates the spheres of love, the relationship with God, and ethics.

The encounter with the other brings the problem of ethics to the forefront – when confronted with otherness, I immediately become responsible for it.[23] This responsibility, of

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[21] Ibid., p. 34.

[22] A similar statement is made by C. G. Jung in his psychoanalytic analysis of love: with regard to the close, symmetrical relationship between loving partners, we can say that the partners contain each other. Noteworthy is Jung’s thesis that we can only speak of being in each other in the case of mutual sympathy. In this context, Plato’s cosmological idea regarding the individual’s sense of incompleteness, which begins with the division of sexuality, can also be cited.

[23] Lévinas’s overemphasis on responsibility is an intriguing anachronism in a society marked by the irresponsibility of individualism. It is clear that the personalism of responsibility parallels the development of postmodern ethics, as seen in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

course, carries a relevance that goes beyond its immediate legal or moral nuances. In the meeting of different gazes, what manifests is love that pertains to the essence of our existence, the destiny revealed in the mere gaze, and the inherent human value embedded in the other. My approach to the other is more adequately realized as a contemplative attentiveness directed toward the personal life-path conceived as fate, rather than through actions aligned with formal ethical principles. The I-thou dualistic phenomenology is alien to impersonal, universalizing moral principles, for the moral measure already contains within it the unnameability of our individuality. In Lévinas, formal moral stipulations are not thematised, as he derives ethics directly from the individual. Relational selfhood inherently contains morality within itself.

In Lévinas's phenomenology, the moral and legal problematisations are replaced by the Gaze, endowed with a metaphysical role. My gaze directed at the other ultimately forms the path leading to my selfhood. In one of his interviews,[24] Lévinas refers to certain aspects of the original metaphysics of the Gaze. It is the Gaze that reveals the essence of the other, who thereby appears as an identity speaking an original language. At the same time, allowing the other to remain as other should not be understood as some form of moral normativity. Similar to Gadamer's hermeneutical conception of humanity, the human being here is inherently open, and this openness is realized through the acceptance of otherness, thereby actualizing one's own openness. For this

[24] Lévinas: op. cit., p. 109–128.

reason, the ontological aspect of openness is more powerful than its ethical dimension.

As already emphasized, the Gaze is both the symbol and the criterion of an understanding, letting-be, and accepting attitude. In the Gaze, my respectful relation to the other is associated with the fulfilment of the ontological potential of my selfhood. Since the Gaze signifies openness, it cannot be connected to various forms of merely looking. Observing or staring does not count as the Gaze, and it remains far removed from the self-consciousness that intensifies in the face of otherness.

Since the Gaze is the result of a certain human attitude, it is meaningless to apply it universally to everyone. Neither the murderer nor the executioner, nor even the victim lost in narcissistic isolation, possesses a true gaze. The reason for this becomes clear from Lévinas's response to the question "What does the Gaze mean?", which, according to him, is an image-like form grounded in the asymmetrical relationship with the other. Our relation to the Gaze is a relation to our own weakness. In the gaze of the other, I directly glimpse my own alterity. The affirmation of my self does not necessarily entail the experience of otherness –as Martin Buber claimed – at most, it upholds the absolute validity of the "Thou shalt not kill" prohibition. According to the principle of the "asymmetry of intersubjectivity", the condition of the other depends on my responsibility, meaning that my own moral values are determined by my legally codified relations to others. The Gaze is always more than a mere glance, as it carries the weight of my responsibility for the existence of others.

The epiphany of the Gaze in the face-to-face encounter between active participants confronts us with the culture of responsibility for the other. It connects us with the intimacy of the bearer of the contemplated gaze, pulling the individual out of narcissistic isolation and leading to the establishment of the interactive *community* of discourse and exchanges. In this sense, the assumed publicness of the Gaze holds significant praxeological importance.

The Other is another human being. Lévinas supports the transcendence of otherness with theological reasoning: God, existing as the unity of the Father and the Logos, appeared to Cain as a mere Gaze. When Cain is questioned about his brother's whereabouts, he tries to evade responsibility. He does not perceive the personal significance of the Gaze, which appears as a hierophany. Responding with childlike spontaneity to God's question, he denies being his brother's keeper, shirking ethical responsibility and appealing to his supposed independence. In Lévinas's interpretation, Cain asserts pure ontology: *I am I, and he is he*.[25] In reality, I have nothing to do with him. However, Cain makes a grave error in this presumed ontological differentiation of irresponsibility, as I encounter the Other precisely within the horizon of finitude.

Confronting the mortality of others awakens me to the most intrinsic possibilities of my own existence. Through the experience of dying, I become aware that the fate of others is connected to my ethics and the problem of the meaning of life, as my indifference to the fate of others can intertwine with the

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[25] The logic of intersubjectivity dismantles precisely this hermetic isolation of subjectivity.

suspicion of my guilt before my conscience regarding their death. Therefore, "I must take responsibility for the other's death, so as not to leave him alone in the solitude of death".[26] It is the questioning gaze that appeals to my existence, revealing that in my assumed responsibility, I must treat the other as an asymmetrical alterity of my selfhood.

However, the problem of finitude holds independent metaphysical significance, which I will elaborate on in a separate discussion below. For now, we can grasp the foundational idea of Lévinas's phenomenology of identity as follows: the other is the path through which I can approach the intersubjective sphere of my selfhood, and I must understand myself as a subject within the culture of responsibility. The other, as a being that uses their own language, reveals themselves to me, which I can either affirm (through the asymmetrical relationship that develops as my identity projects into otherness) or deny (by relating indifferently to the other's death, thereby becoming complicit in their destruction).

5.5. The Everyday Dimensions of Otherness

The authenticity of our identity and the quality of our confrontation with the Other are determined by the ontological structure of everyday life. Since Lévinas's concept of otherness unfolds more in the ethically understood realm of "ought" rather than in the ontologically relevant context of

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[26] Lévinas: op. cit., p. 152.

"is", we must turn our attention to the actual social projections of alterity in the following discussion.

The *proximity* of the other conceals a certain *distance*. Following Simmel, we can ponder how the near can also be distant. If we understand estrangement not as unfamiliarity but as a complete indifference to our situation, then are we not tempted to open ourselves to the estrangement that emerges? If we accept Guillaume's assertion that we open up more confidently to a stranger than to our good acquaintances, does this not create a paradoxical situation in which the closest is indeed the farthest? Starting from these questions, we will consider the identity of the ego as it is constituted in the average of everyday life and the reality of distancing proximity.

In our society, which has become a victim of massification, the direct experience of the Other becomes the victim of an anonymous otherness expressed in artificial estrangement. Everyday experiences of estrangement do not necessarily favor the understanding of alterity. We could also say that we are witnessing the artificial production of estrangement. On one hand, there are people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and denominations who constantly remind us of otherness; on the other hand, we encounter its symbolic expressions. The metamorphoses of today's human identity are referred to by Guillaume as a *spectral mode of being*, which represents the specific way of existence and change for the postmodern individual.[27] What opportunities for self-

[27] The spectral mode of existence is excellently characterized by the products of our heterogeneous culture, ranging from graffiti and masquerade balls to libertine expressions and protests cloaked in anonymity.

realization remain for today's person behind the mask of untraceable changes? Can we speak of authentic self-identity in a world of feigned attitudes and opaque alterity?

According to Guillaume's reasoning, the metamorphoses of alterity manifest in our multifaceted world, taking the form of a *spectral mode of being* as possible concretizations of the Other. By spectral existence, we understand our openness to otherness and the theoretical possibility of adopting new images. The spectrality of our urbanized existence can be grasped as a potential existence and an openness to possibilities. It is potential because it inherently includes the possibilities of becoming other as a yet undefined aspect of ourselves, which, through our decisions and our relations with others, transitions from the realm of potential existence to that of actual existence.

We can treat the concept of spectral existence in Guillaume and Baudrillard as a social-ontological correlative of Heidegger's category of potential existence. Heidegger's *Dasein* is always ahead of its future. Its given identity is that which is not yet, as it draws its identity from the future consequences of present decisions. In contrast, spectral existence reflects the personal quality of an individual living in an eternal present as it is constituted in relation to others. The existential roots of the potential existence of presence and the spectrality of my selfhood are related – just as *Dasein* relates to itself, willingly or unwillingly, and cannot exist otherwise than in this relation of being, so too, amidst the contingencies of my everyday life, I am unable to escape the Other. We can refer to this existential compulsion as the given condition of our relation to possibility and otherness.

My relation to the Other rarely unfolds in the context of familiarity, recognition, and security. In our pluralistic world, we often relate to an opaque, untraceable Other. Just as we are unable to foresee our future, which emerges as the constitutive element of our decisions, we are also powerless witnesses to our identity forming within the realm of estrangement. Nowadays, spectrality unfolds amidst an open potential existence. Consequently, my present self is theoretically exposed at any moment to the influences of untraceable otherness. Since alterity is inherently estrangement and separateness, we must inquire into the phenomenological constitution of this estrangement in the following discussion.

Spectrality, disguised in the mask of estrangement, takes on the form of anonymity. In our society, which lines up simulacra side by side, transforms the natural to the point of unrecognizability, and enforces the terror of excessive consumption, identity largely manifests in simulated forms. Nevertheless, a simulated identity can hardly be integrated into an exponentially developing social process. The generalization of these disguised manifestations favours the massification of large cities and the rise of the anonymous Other. The dehumanized cities and so-called lonely masses are the result of individual will dissolving into the endless possibilities of otherness without finality. Once the ego dissolves into the anonymous anyone, there is nothing left but to helplessly submit our selfhood to the terror of massification. The "anyone" becomes the nameless bearer of identities that remain forever foreign to one another, yet seamlessly dissolve into momentary communication. Under the reign of the

degraded existential qualities of the “anyone”, it is difficult to speak of genuine communication and community. Aristotelian friendship based on similarity and virtue is replaced by massification, the indifference of “I don’t know you”, and the slogans of “everything is owed to me” egoism.

In a society where one’s selfhood unfolds in the realm of anonymity, it becomes impossible to think within the value categories articulated by Lévinas. Spectrality, as a contingent quality defining the self, stands far from the personal nature of the Gaze, which reveals the intimacy of my selfhood within the I-Thou span. A randomly constituted self is incapable of assuming the personal aspect of the Gaze, through which the Other appears as an independent individual with an original identity distinct from mine, providing the space and opportunity for the miracle of Aristotelian friendship. When Cicero or Aristotle declared that “a friend is another self”, they were referring to the message conveyed through the language of the Gaze and to the fulfilment of our selfhood within the mode of social existence.[28]

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[28] It is no coincidence that our disintegrating world, which pays little attention to the Gaze, often invokes the motif of love from Platonic cosmology – albeit not in a philosophical context, but rather in a fairly commercial, propagandistic, or self-deceptive one. In a society that has lost faith in virtue-based friendship, nostalgia for a mystical beginning intensifies, and in proportion to the experience of loneliness, the expectation for the emergence of a new, androgynous, nearly identity-less person begins to manifest. However, the holistic representations of humanity in New Age and millenarian sects are also the consequences of distrust toward the Other and the loss of sight of the Gaze. While classical anthropologies treated selfhood individually and monolithically, the polyphony of our postmodernity exposes the self to the play of external

The spectral existence, subjected to contingency and uncontrollability, also embeds itself in the world of mass consumption. As an unprincipled consumer, I become incapable of discerning or selecting. The moment I consume for the sake of consumption itself or to quell some social or psychological urge, the differentiating effect of selection ceases. Consequently, I too am reduced to an anonymous factor within the realm of simulacra, and for others, I become merely another sign in a world of signs.

In our ever-changing world, all things reveal themselves as mere signs. The disappearance of the Gaze reveals the world through the hypostasis of an immediately given sign, requiring no special interpretation. At this point, the Other loses their identity and falls victim to the depersonalization of being reduced to an anonymous unity. Behind such losses of self-identity lie significant world-political and social phenomena. The world of anonymous otherness is no longer a personal world but a realm of mixed, multi-meaning signs, where simulacra, blending due to their lack of inherent identity, form not an ordered structure of things but random, illogical combinations of elements.[29]

In the realm of anonymous otherness, the Other often emerges as foreign and unapproachable, revealing themselves as an indifferent being. More accurately, they appear unexpectedly and, just as unpredictably, step out of my field

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circumstances, suspending the ontological boundaries responsible for individuals' places.

[29] Cf. the idea of "the world as a vast collage": Baudrillard and Guillaume: op. cit., p. 17.

of perception, having lost their identity. They become merely an image, indistinguishable from any other, easily replaceable by any gaze at any moment. The Gaze, by contrast, is unique and differentiated, while the image conjures the homogeneity of impersonal otherness. This strangeness of the Gaze is adeptly captured by literary thought, particularly sensitive to the question of simulated identity. Kafka's texts – such as *The Metamorphosis* – exemplify the uncertainty of individual identity, the discontinuity of self, and the ontological unpredictability of existential situations. In this light, we find tangible reflections of identity's discontinuity within the civilized world.

Nowadays, we have grown accustomed to the discontinuity stemming from the incoherence of postmodernity, rooted in the contradictions of signs. The illusion of the Other's accessibility reinforces our experience of this discontinuity in our lives. This is supported by various forms of communication, such as messaging, phone calls, and the possibilities of real-time interaction. However, in mediated communication, we encounter a notable absence of the Other – the presence of otherness that carries the Gaze.

Similar to the structure of the metropolis, the possibilities of mass communication nurture the potentiality and illusion of the Other's accessibility. Within the realm of mediated communication, parties can largely disregard the verification strategies crucial for establishing personal connections. For instance, a phone conversation can never fully convey the immediacy of face-to-face interaction or the experience of the Other's presence. Instead – using the

concepts of communication models – the sender relates to an impersonal entity (the receiver) whose identity eludes the possibilities and requirements of personal identification. In technical communication, the identity of the Other effectively eludes the identification alternatives found in traditional forms of communication, which present the Other not as one person among many but as a unique subject. Behind this technologically mediated communication, the blurring of identity – plunging into anonymity – particularly favours the unfolding of spectral identity. The individual on the other end of the phone is not this or that (specific) subject but rather a person inclined and suited to adopt various identities. Telecommunications, the masses in urban environments, and the stereotypical mindset of printed media all envelop the individual in the fog of anonymity.

In our world, the public sphere unfolds under the sign of anonymity. The emergence of otherness in its anonymous form is by no means solely a postmodern phenomenon. As Guillaume notes, anonymity characterized the Gutenberg era as well; with the spread of printing technology, the Gaze of the Other became concealed behind the written text. Although my intention is not to delve into a hermeneutical analysis of the personal nature of written text, one cannot overlook the fact that mass communication shapes the representation of the Other in how we perceive them and how they are constituted within the social sphere.

The written text can be seen as a cultural reality that obscures the Gaze of the Other, relegating to the background the unique and original essence of their existence, which is

continually unfolding. While Socratic dialogues consistently tied otherness to the specific individuality of the interlocutor through their physical presence, written texts foster a one-sided anonymity within the communicative process. This anonymity entrusts the reader with their own thoughts, imagination, and interpretative skills, effectively concealing the writer's true identity. It is not my intention to debate whether anonymity in written texts is more apparent from the writer's or the reader's perspective. However, one can venture a conclusion: fixed culture has generally favoured the overshadowing of vibrant, lifelike otherness. More precisely, the personhood and uniqueness of the Other have become casualties of freely interpretable cultural events. Furthermore, electronically mediated communication has further deepened the chasm between the Self and the Other.

With some exaggeration, one might argue that the Other, as a meaning-bearing identity, has completely vanished from audiovisual communicative processes. The presenter's face does not represent the Gaze that uniquely addresses the listener; the script they read is not a message directed personally at me. They themselves, as mere employees, cease to exist as unique individuals, degrading into virtual faces and voices that, in the context of social perception, are – at best – elevated to models or archetypes. However, this model-like existence is just as far removed from capturing the essence of the Other as the monotonous voice of an unknown presenter perpetually emanating from the radio. What is currently labelled as a model is nothing more than a stereotype of framed otherness, crystallized and uncritically idolized by the

masses, which stands in stark contrast to the essence of the Other.

As soon as all our social experiences provide us with the experience of otherness sinking into anonymity, we may justifiably ask: can we still find the essence of the Other when we address an anonymous "anyone" in nearly every instance? The answer –paradoxically – must be sought within the very nature of anonymity itself.

Anonymity alienates and distances our inherent openness to otherness. "This anonymity mitigates the gap that separates the subject not only from itself but also from its social context and, indeed, from reality as a whole."[30] At a certain point, we can see that it is precisely anonymity that becomes fruitful, providing the individual with a framework of normality. In the world of simulacra, anyone can easily fall victim to fleeting images, models, and stereotypes, and may become inclined to replace the authentic with an imagined world along the unstable boundary between reality and imitation. From anonymity, we can expect the possibility of distancing ourselves from the imaginary and maintaining a healthy detachment from ourselves. In this sense, anonymity plays a dual role: on one hand, it depersonalizes the Other and forces the social actor into the realm of the "anyone"; on the other hand, it serves as a social operator that facilitates the foundation of our selfhood.

At the same time, we can consider anonymity a guarantor of healthy indifference. It is no coincidence, nor is it

[30] Baudrillard and Guillaume: op. cit., p. 21.

solely explainable from a psychological perspective, that many people find it easier to open up to strangers and are often more inclined to invest emotions or business capital in those who are distant rather than in those with whom they share established familial and/or emotional ties. Moreover, we tend to assess the mistakes of strangers more easily and objectively than those of individuals whose gaze reflects our own. I would term this interesting phenomenon a *bearing capacity of otherness* within the human psyche. Everyone is capable of understanding a certain amount and type of otherness – based on their previous experiences, innate openness, and ethically grounded patience. Beyond this, however, individuals may become reclusive or aggressive, or they might retreat into a world of private fantasies. Once they feel unable to embrace otherness, they replace openness with suspicion and substitute the Gaze with a schizophrenic monologue.[31]

Amidst changing challenges, most people establish a relationship with the large, anonymous society that can be illustrated by the motion of a pendulum. They fear being excluded from the public consciousness, which leads them to seek the anonymity of public life, yet they are simultaneously overwhelmed by the lurking presence of the Other and try to avoid the alienating effect of their gaze. Thus, the world of anonymity allows individuals to separate the familiar from the foreign, to delineate the private from the public sphere at will,

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[31] It is no coincidence that the socially unacceptable sphere of alterity has gradually led to a schizophrenic culture. Alongside the increasing distrust and incomprehensibility towards the Other, we witness dissociative inner struggles, self-alienation, and a sense of estrangement.

or even to substitute the burdensome alterity with an imaginary reality.

In certain cases, the self-organizing mechanisms of communities and the toolkit for renewing identities can be attributed to anonymity. In this way, anonymity becomes a factor that generates new trends or even a social operator that modifies the social order according to foreseeable logic. This is possible because anonymity encompasses the open possibilities of undefined otherness. In a society cloaked in the indifference of anonymity, anyone can theoretically take the stage at any moment, breaking free from obscurity. However, such sudden and often unpredictable instances of emergence can similarly be followed by unexpected returns to anonymity. Within the collective world of anonymity, otherness unfolds in an environment of open possibilities. Here, we are not dealing with a definable otherness – one that possesses an identifiable identity – but rather with the emergence of "imitative identities", akin to simulacra.

The anonymous Other exerts a direct influence on our selfhood within the public sphere. However, this influence is rarely clear and predictable. Among strangers, we cannot be certain how much control the unexpected Other – who intrudes deeply into our self-perception (Simmel) – exerts amidst the everyday representations of otherness. To what extent does this alterity, which is fundamentally distinguishable from our own nature, carry potential forms of identity? As this stranger projects their identity toward us, how does it shape our own? Was Sartre correct in identifying the Other with hell, thereby condemning the identity-

modifying function of otherness? Furthermore, we must ask: how does alterity relate to us in the realm of spectral existence and thought?

Spectral existence characterizes those "multifaceted" individuals who reveal little more than glimpses of one face or another during communicative interactions, often unintentionally and under the capricious influence of circumstances. The spectrality of our social situation is a consequence of the uncomfortable dichotomy between the subject and the world – an ongoing process in which we witness the continual evolution of identities. In such a context, the issue of identity itself may not even arise. Entities that spontaneously and uncritically adapt to the possible facers of otherness float within the ceaseless metamorphosis of subjectivity, rendering them unable to process their situation in terms of the categories of existential loss.

Thus, otherness can also serve a depersonalizing function. When I do not relate alterity to my psychophysical boundaries but instead become absorbed in the metamorphoses of the anonymous Other, I risk slipping into anonymity, identifying with foreign symbols, and degrading into a mere sign within the realm of signs. In this context, we fail to recognize ourselves, becoming incapable of true understanding. "The more you distance yourself from the body, identity, and name, the more you enter the sphere of unsettling coding and metacoding"[32] – until we find ourselves no longer discussing

[32] Baudrillard and Guillaume: op. cit., p. 29.

society but rather *sociality*.[33] An individual who identifies with the anonymity of the metamorphoses of otherness ceases to exhibit attitudes characteristic of a named subject at the level of sociality. Consequently, due to their uncritical identification with otherness, they communicate not as a person with a name but as a code – and in the realm of codes, there is no room for the Other.

From these reflections, one might even infer the postmodern threat to the autonomy of the Other. The spectral mode of existence characteristic of postmodernity has not only enabled the interchangeability of undefined identities but has also precipitated a crisis of alterity. According to Baudrillard,[34] the degradation of otherness to a mere sign arises from an excessive extension of individual freedom. In a world where everything can be ordered and tailored to personal taste, we witness the agony of the true Other. As a sign, the Other can be shaped and reshaped based on anyone's image due to the process of depersonalization.[35] While the decline of modernity has drawn attention to the question of otherness, it has simultaneously marginalized its concrete perception.

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33 Sociality, understood as a degraded form of social existence, corresponds to an ontological notion of objectivity. The conditions for consciously embraced socialization are inadvertently replaced by the contingent factors of irresponsible conformity.

34 See Baudrillard and Guillaume: op. cit., p. 99, 129 et passim.

35 These ideas – characteristic of the philosophy of the 1980s – fit seamlessly with the effects of the later developed technology of digital photography: the computer processing that follows the act of capturing images tailors the model's likeness to the imagination and expectations of the creator, aligning it with subjective criteria and thus robbing it of its original alterity.

The modern technological possibilities heralded the arrival of an era in which the Other can be produced almost limitlessly. Ethical relationships have been supplanted by mere production. The Other has lost their quality as an autonomous person, creating the illusion of freedom while fostering the impression of mouldability at an object level.

However, once we lose the ability to perceive the Gaze and subordinate the Other to our whims, we strip away their original and unrepeatable fatefulness. Moreover, we lose the ability to perceive our own fate in the reflection of the Other's. Alterity, once conceived as *fate*, is degraded to mere *difference*.

In the realm of genetic engineering, aesthetic surgeries, and autistic cultures, our sense of self becomes detached from alterity. In our loneliness, the loss of otherness goes hand in hand with the production of alterity in the absence of the Other. Our fragmented relationship with the Other is replaced by the infinite aestheticisation of our self-image, aligned with our imagined ideals. The modelling of a universal corporeality can be viewed as a symptom of a much deeper intervention: it signifies a transformation of both alterity and fate.

6. The Limits of Selfhood: The Concept of Tactility in Aristotle and the Problem of Phenomenology

We now live in a world of many exciting trends, such as "biohacking" and "transhumanism", organically linking biology (the concept of the "inner" and of "mine") and technology (the "outer" and the "objectual"). In this world populated with "biotes" and in our age of artificial limbs and sensory organs, science fiction has become science fact due to our current software tools for speech recognition, the Google Lens, the Cloud, and the instant accessibility of the world's knowledge contained in Wikipedia articles etc. Nevertheless, *nihil novi*: it is the essence of us humans that our existence is linked with the use of tools, instruments and technology. Hence, my paper offers a phenomenological analysis of the basis of Aristotle's conception about perception and movement, attempting to uncover the ancient Greek roots of the contemporary merging between the inner and the outer worlds, as seen from the perspective of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology.

Phenomenological theories have a long history in undermining the "traditional" opposition between mind and body. In this paper, this manifests itself through the fact that the basic concepts related to corporeality – e.g., "perception",

"movement" – are the conditions of possibility for any construction of meaning and consciousness processes, as also shown by contemporary neuroscience and communication theory in the case of intelligence and communication. However, this was already known to Aristotle, long before modern neuroscience, but the stakes were even higher for him: the issue of corporeality is itself problematic in terms of determining its boundaries, as the limits of the Self (or my body) merge with those of the world. The situation is similar to the "passive and active synthesis" of Husserl and to Heidegger's "double openness" of the *Dasein*, conflating the boundaries of the Self and the limits of the world for our human being-there, or consciousness.

6.1. Aristotle on Perception

It suffices to recall Kant's transcendental aesthetics, in order to appreciate the philosophical importance of sensations. However, even before Kant, the issue was put into philosophical (phenomenological) focus by Aristotle, who started the essential radicalization of the question of perception. The naive simplification of the Pre-Socratics ends with the Stagirite, and there is also no more room for the disdainful aloofness of the Platonic analyses.

But what is it exactly that changes with Aristotle? In his *De anima*, he establishes that perception can no longer be viewed as a "movement", or as passive "suffering", during which the sense organ undergoes a qualitative change. If we conceive of perception as a form of movement, then there is a

difference between perception interpreted as "potentiality" and "actual perception".[1] In this sense, perception is a continuous progress from possibility to "realization" (cf. *en-telecheia*). In order for this realization to come about – i.e., for the movement, or "suffering", to happen –, three basic conditions must apply: (1) the movement must have a certain minimal *intensity*, and (2) there must be a minimal *difference* between the two opposing poles of perception (like is not affected by like),[2] but (3) this minimal difference should not become *too sharp*.[3]

This interpretation of perception as movement, and of movement as both possibility and actualization, is supported by contemporary communication theory and neuroscience.

6.2. Communication Theory

Hungarian communication theorist Özséb Horányi characterizes his subject field thus: "the communicative is conceived of as the potential place of the relevant preparedness of a (problem-solving) agent, necessary for recognizing and solving a *problem*. […] A problem for a specific agent is *the critical difference* between his or her actual state and a desirable state, insofar as the agent recognizes this difference. […] 'Difference' means that the two states are categorized as different for the agent. […] Since the difference can be so slight that it does not yet pose a problem […],

[1] Aristotle: *De anima*, 417a.

[2] Idem: *De generatione*, 323b.

[3] Idem: *De anima*, 424a.

'critical' signifies that it provokes the problem-solving behaviour of the agent in that specific case." [4]

As one can see, the categories used in these discussions are quite similar. In Aristotle, the "difference" and the "minimal intensity" are basic conditions of perception, while contemporary "communication" is also a mode of manifestation of the *entelecheia*, or the place for preparing oneself for solving the potential "problem", in which the difference and the minimal (or in this case: "critical") intensity play a decisive role.

6.3. Neuroscience

"Movement" has an even more significant role within modern neuroscience. In fact, according to British neuroscientist Daniel Wolpert, "we have a brain for one reason and one reason only, and that's to produce adaptable and complex movements. There is no other reason to have a brain. Think about it. Movement is the only way you have of affecting the world around you. So think about communication – speech, gestures, writing, sign language – they're all mediated through contractions of your muscles. So it's really important to remember that sensory, memory and cognitive processes are all important, but they're only important to either drive or suppress future movements. There can be no evolutionary advantage to laying down memories of

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[4] Horányi: *A kommunikáció participációra alapozott felfogásáról*, p. 246–247.

childhood or perceiving the colour of a rose if it doesn't affect the way you're going to move later in life.

Now for those who don't believe this argument, we have trees and grass on our planet without the brain, but the clinching evidence is this animal here – the humble sea squirt. Rudimentary animal, has a nervous system, swims around in the ocean in its juvenile life. And at some point of its life, it implants on a rock. And the first thing it does in implanting on that rock, which it never leaves, is to digest its own brain and nervous system for food. So once you don't need to move, you don't need the luxury of that brain".[5]

In other words, movement is the condition of possibility for the brain.

At the same time, movement seems to play an important role in the mental/cerebral construction of the body itself. This circumstance was used in an utterly impressive manner by Vilayanur Ramachandran and by his colleagues in a novel form of therapy for phantom limb pain through their mirror box. Through its artificial visual feedback, the box helps the patient to move the phantom limb, "pulling it out" from its painful position. If a mirror is placed at the centreline of the body, allowing the patient see the mirror image of the missing limb, then the same (symmetrically opposite) movement will often be felt in the phantom (missing) limb, alleviating certain kinds of pain. E.g., when the patient feels as if the phantom hand is locked in a painful spasm, the healthy hand can be

[5] Wolpert: *The real reason for brains*.

clenched into a fist and then opened up again, while looking at it in the mirror.

However, all this has already been anticipated by Husserl. "How, then, do I regard my eye as my own? I can do so, according to Husserl, only by touching it. Touched, it provides the 'touch and kinetic sensations' that allow me to apprehend it as belonging to my body. Such sensations are crucial. As Husserl writes, 'A subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not have an appearing body'. For my body to appear as mine, i.e., for there to be the self-awareness that makes it mine, we need 'the phenomenon of double sensation'. Lacking it, we are like those patients that the neurologist Oliver Sacks describes who on waking attempt to make room for themselves by shoving their own legs out of bed. Unable to touch themselves, they react to and move their bodies like foreign objects. This can be put in terms of the 'localization' that touch provides. The kinaesthetic sensations of tension that I experience in moving my hand become localized because they are constantly 'intermixed' with those of given by the hand as it touches objects."[6] Because: "intelligence […] does not just involve the working of algorithms. It is founded on flesh's ability to move itself, to feel itself, and to engage in the body projects that accompanied our learning a language. This implies that to copy intelligence – i.e., produce an artificial version of it – the flesh that forms its basis must also be reproduced."

6 Mensch: *Artificial Intelligence and the Phenomenology of Flesh*, p. 463–464.

It is not the purpose of the present chapter to go further into these issues which are rather relevant from a phenomenological perspective as well. Nevertheless, they illustrate very well that the material, viz. the corporeal, can serve as the "place" for the processes of meaning formation and as a condition of possibility for any set of relationships forming a body of meaning. In fact, contemporary science supports the idea that the condition of possibility for (Aristotelian) perception, i.e., movement, is at the very basis of the appearing of our world, or even of its existence.

6.4. Perception in Aristotle: A Reexamination

As seen above, the perceptual process presupposes for Aristotle a *primary difference* between the organ and the object of sense. At the same time, it also requires the existence of a "movement", or "suffering", through which one can act on the other. Before examining the meaning of this primary difference and of the movement which makes the suffering possible, the list of the basic senses should be clarified. Aristotle distinguishes five senses:[7] hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch. Since all sensing presupposes a "medium" (*metaxy*), sensations can be divided into two groups: sensations for which the medium is external (sight, hearing and smell) and those that presuppose an internal medium

[7] In fact, for Aristotle, there are six senses. However, one cannot talk about the *sensus communis* in the same sense as about the first five.

(taste and touch).[8] So let us now turn to the difference between the medium interpreted as external or as internal.

I have already noted that the condition of possibility for perception consists, for Aristotle, in a primary difference between the object and the perceptual organ and in the movement through which one of them can "touch" the other. In other words, whatever the type of perception, it has a touch basis. Nevertheless, there are differences regarding the essence of this touch: although "all organs of sense perceive by contact, the contact is mediate: touch alone perceives by immediate contact".[9] The difference between touch and the other senses is that the latter require a medium of a nature different from the two poles involved in sense perception. But, since "all organs of sense perceive by contact", touch can be regarded as the primary mode of perception, on which I will focus in the following.

Touch is what makes the difference between animals and other "living beings": animals have a "minimal sense of touch".[10] This is what makes it possible to speak about sensations in the case of animals. But what is it that differentiates humans from animals? According to Aristotle, humans have the "softest skin", which makes it possible for their touch to be the "tenderest" and the "most sophisticated". However, skin is nothing else than "dried" flesh. Thus, the

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8 The concept of the "outer" and of the "inner" are related here to the perceiving subject as a whole, and not to the actual organ of perception. According to Aristotle, taste is a modification of touch.

9 Aristotle: *De anima*, 435a.

10 Labarriére: *Sur la différence entre l'homme et l'animale chez Aristote* (manuscript), p. 21.

"softness of flesh" is added to the fineness of skin, making it possible for the sense of touch to be the "acutest". This perfection of sensation is no accident: it shows that, being endowed with the most perfect form of sensation, man is also capable of receiving the most perfect form of soul.[11] In spite of all these, the difference between humans and animals cannot be reduced to the soul – which, due to the active intellect, "is everything that exists" –, since human universality must also have its corporeal aspects. This universality, which could also be qualified as transcendental, is based on the medium of touch, i.e., on the flesh.

The process of sensation, which, as we have seen, presupposes the difference between the sense organ and its object, also implies a *secondary difference*. According to Aristotle, sensations are there to inform us about the differences (e.g., cold/hot, dry/wet etc.) within our world, which, on their turn, attest to the presence of things. This is nothing else than our own *being with* the things of our world. Or, more specifically, the presence of things and my own presence coincide in sensation.[12]

6.5. The Case of Touch: From Aristotle to Husserl (and Heidegger)

All sensation has its basis in touch, but the specific sense of touch is the only one for which there is "direct" contact. In this case, we do not perceive "through", but "along with" the

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[11] See Brague: *Aristote et la question du monde*, p. 259.

[12] Ibid., p. 369.

medium.[13] To touch means to simultaneously sense the medium as well, i.e., the flesh, which is not the actual organ of touch, the latter being located somewhere else ("in the proximity of the heart").[14]

Now, flesh as a medium is within us humans. This intimacy does not mean self-enclosure, but, on the contrary, our being of flesh represents, in fact, our *openness* to things, similarly to Husserl's passive synthesis. As a matter of fact, the Husserlian dichotomy between active and passive synthesis has Aristotelian roots, going back to the duality of the *nous poietikos* and the *nous pathetikos*, i.e., the agent and the passive intellect.[15] Additionally to this parallel between Aristotle and Husserl, there is a similar analogy between Heidegger's and Husserl's conception, which is also due to the Aristotelian differentiation. This second parallel consists in the "twofold openness" of both *Dasein* and consciousness, which is "poetic" and "pathetic" at the same time.

Through our flesh, we are open to things, which is best illustrated through the fact that "if I touch something, then it

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13 Ibid., p. 372.

14 Aristotle: *De sensu*, 439a.

15 According to Husserl, there are two roots of consciousness processes. On the one hand, some mental processes are actively generated by an agent (called the Ego); e.g., these thoughts I am now putting on the page are actively generated by my Ego. These mental acts are of the "attentive" or "focusing" kind. On the other hand, there are also processes "giving themselves" within my consciousness, which are not actively generated by me; e.g., the background "environment", which I actively perceive while formulating these ideas, are not the result of my Ego activity, but rather "automatically" and passively given to my consciousness.

also touches me".[16] It is also what Merleau-Ponty means when stating that touching is always to touch oneself as well;[17] being simultaneously the one who touches and the one who is touched. But if touch is a movement of me contacting the object and also of the object contacting me, then is this relationship actually in balance? Or if not, then in whose favour does the scale incline: am I the one who touches the object, or is it the object that touches me? In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that the one who touches is actually me, when stating that the "ready-to-hand" (*das Zuhandene*) cannot touch the *Dasein*. Unfortunately, this Heideggerian idea is overridden by the Cartesian paradigm, stating that men are the "masters and owners of nature", which is characteristic for modernity and has also led to the contemporary dominance of technology, i.e., of the "ready-to-hand".

In fact, Heidegger's conception contains two hidden presuppositions: (1) the meaning of "being-there" can be exactly circumscribed, its limits can be traced unerringly, which makes it possible to speak separately about the Ego (*Dasein*) and about the world; (2) I am the one who *initiates* the movement (touch) and I can stop anytime. However, as we shall see, the boundaries cease to exist within the act of touching. Furthermore, it is not "me" who initiates the movement, since it is not intentional, but rather has the character of a passive synthesis. Just as the *ego cogito* always presupposes *cogitata mea*, I also cannot hide from the openness to which I am exposed through my sense of touch.

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[16] Brague: op. cit., p. 370.

[17] Cf. Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 309.

Perception is based on a fundamental difference between subject and object, i.e., the medium between its two poles. This uncreated (viz. non-thematic) difference is the very factor that makes the process of perception possible in the case of sight, hearing and taste. E.g., in the case of sight, the air is an unposited medium which makes perception possible as a *metaxy*. If this *distance*, or *boundary*, is lacking, then there is also no visual perception.

In fact, James Mensch's vivid presentation of Husserl's relevant phenomenological analyses might illustrate these points most effectively: "The ability of flesh to be taken as both subject and object gives it the special character of its self-awareness. At the origin of the 'inner distance' that characterizes the subject-object dichotomy is the fact that on the level of touch, flesh's relation to itself is not direct, but rather mediated.

As Husserl makes clear, no other sense can substitute for touch in founding self-awareness. Take for example sight. I can regard my body, but as Husserl notes, 'I do not see my body the way I touch myself. What I call the seen Body is not something seeing that is seen, the way that my body, as touched, is something touching that is touched.' What is lacking here is 'the phenomenon of double sensation', a phenomenon that could only occur if 'one eye could rub past the other' – that is, if eye could touch eye. Similarly, when I look myself in the eye with a mirror, 'I do not', Husserl claims, 'see the seeing eye as seeing'. The eye I regard is like the eye of another. I have to employ empathy to indirectly judge that it is identical with my eye. The eye that regards me from the

mirror is, in other words, experienced as an object. My seeing it does not give me a first person experience of its seeing. To have this I would have to experience its seeing as my seeing. Touch does this since the hand that is touched also feels. Here the sensations of the touched hand point back to the touching hand as touching. By contrast, the eye that I regard in the mirror is like the inanimate objects that I touch. I feel their properties, but I do not feel them feeling me. They do not, in other words, return my awareness to myself."[18]

6.6. Inside and Outside: The Limits of the Self and the Boundaries of the World

The situation changes in the case of touch. The unposited medium becomes posited through the fact that it is not only the condition of possibility for the sense of touch, but it is itself touched. To sense an object through touching means, in fact, to sense ourselves through touch.[19] If perception presupposes a movement which makes reciprocal influence, or "suffering", possible, then this means, in the case of touch, the movement that is simultaneously touching as well as touched. This also implies that the non-thematic difference, which constitutes the boundary for other perceptions and can never be made into our own, disappears within the sense of touch, or more specifically, it becomes posited. As Aristotle puts it, it is as if the medium would slip from our hands in the act of touching:

18 Mensch: op. cit., p. 463.
19 Cf. Brague: op. cit., p. 372.

"we do perceive everything through a medium; but in these cases [i.e., the acts of touching] the fact escapes us".[20]

Hence, if in the case of the other senses we talk about a fundamental difference between the Self and the world, then this becomes a *primary non-differentiation* in the act of touching. However, the issue is even more complicated. If the sense of touch is indeed the basic form of perception, and there is a "minimal contact", i.e., touch, in the case of any act of perception, then does the *boundary*, or the (Heideggerian) "spatial interval" – presupposed, e.g., by the sense of sight, which separates me from the world –, really exist at all? More specifically: where does the boundary, which we cannot possess, and which should be the condition of possibility for the sense of touch, disappear? The problem becomes even more acute – instead of being solved – through the fact that, in the case of touch, the medium is internal. Where do we end, and where do the things of our world begin? Where do we stand when we state that the flesh is internal? These questions are important because it is not clear whether there is a (non-posited) boundary for "fleshness", or if it is just "an extension of the world's flesh".[21] In this sense, "fleshness" would mean the disappearance of the boundary and the state of pre-corporeal undifferentiatedness.[22] This "chiasmus" between my own and the world's "flesh" deconstructs the conceptual dichotomy between the "inner" and the "outer" reality. The

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[20] Aristotle: *De anima*, 423b.

[21] Merleau-Ponty: op. cit., p 309.

[22] See Rogozinski: *„Carnalitatea" comunității.*

world and my own flesh are both simultaneously internal and external.

Husserlian transcendental reflection turns the concepts of the “internal” and the “external” inside out in a similar manner. The world cannot be interpreted as external from its perspective, since this kind of (intentional) reflection is nothing else than a kind of openness to things that also means my exposedness beyond my own self. However, this leads not only to the Self as the place of reflection to be situated outside its own world, which becomes internal to it within reflection, but also to the Self being simultaneously outside itself as well, similarly to this very act of reflection. Or, as Wittgenstein put it: “the subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world”.[23]

We could even say, with Baudrillard, that there is a “double obscenity” not only in the case of communication, but it is actually a much deeper existential category, which applies both to the structure of consciousness and to corporeality. Communication, in its ecstasy (cf. the Greek *ek-stasis*), throws me “outside” of myself and “lays out” everything that is internal, taking away the possibility of any “cover” which would protect me from the internalization of all kinds of external factors, through the externality of the internal and the internality of the external. Nowadays, as Baudrillard puts it, “we no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication”.[24]

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[23] Wittgenstein: *Logikai-filozófiai értekezés*, 5.632.

[24] Baudrillard: *Celălalt prin sine însuşi*, p. 15.

In our current age of communication, the ubiquitous and intrusive nature of information has downgraded both objectuality and alterity to mere elements of a network, condemning the individual to a kind of mental explosion. Our world, or more precisely, what is left of it, has degenerated into an internally heterogeneous consequence of mental functions. In this "absolute proximity" and "complete immediacy" of our world, the novel interpretation of schizophrenia now becomes intelligible in the sense of the original undifferentiatedness.[25] We come much too close to everything, while moving ever farther away from ourselves. There is no more any value-bearing alterity and objectuality for us.

In fact, however, the limit, i.e., the non-positable, can never be possessed by us. It means the stranger within us, or that which is actually external. It is my Self, the transcendental Ego, that is my boundary: the very basis of my consciousness processes, described by Husserl under the heading of the passive synthesis.

Similarly to the eye, which is not a part of what it sees, but its condition of possibility, the Ego is also a condition of possibility for our consciousness processes: the Self is the

[25] The use of the concept of "originality" becomes somewhat forced here, as there is a difference between the original openness to the world that is made possible by our disposition and the schizophrenic openness of our historical age. Although the former openness can also be called schizophrenic, since it recognizes the existence of an effect that takes place within ourselves without being initiated by us and also our "encounter" with that which simultaneously transcends us, the two concepts diverge when it comes to originality.

thinker of its thinking, and it is not thinking that thinks the Self. However problematic this latter point – it would, indeed, deserve a separate treatment in another, future investigation –, if we accept it, then we could also ask the question whether there is an "outside" of sensation at all, which could make the otherness possible. I touch and I am touched at the same time. But, as Aristotle puts it, "we do not perceive the senses themselves".[26] I cannot touch the "movement" creating the touch: there is an "untouchable" negativity within the sense of touch.[27] Similarly to reflection, which posits the pure negativity of the transcendental Ego as the reflexive part of the relationship, the sense of touch must also have its "untouchable", making its existence possible.

If we accept that, in the case of reflection, the Ego is the condition of possibility for the consciousness processes, i.e., it is the Ego that thinks its thinking, then the "subject" of phenomenology is tragically *external*: regardless of whether it is reduced to "pure" Ego or to "pure" flesh, that which is actually transcendental always remains external to the world that it constitutes. If this were not the case, then it would also have to be "bracketed". So, what is the meaning of this "pure" fleshness? It designates nothing else than the "reverse" of my "sensory existence"[28] through which fleshness itself, viz. the sense of touch is created: nothing else then the movement designating the untouchable.

[26] Aristotle: *De anima*, 417a 4; see also: *De generatione*, 330a 26.

[27] Cf. Merleau-Ponty: op. cit., p. 308.

[28] Ibid., p. 309.

This untouchable – and the unthinkable in reflection, i.e., the "pure Ego", or the "implicit *cogito*" – is the aspect of my existence that, although it is always my own Self, also represents that through which I both am "myself" and, at the same time, the farthest away and most alien to "myself".

7. Selfhood at the Fragile Border of (Ab)normality

The exploration of the wider philosophical duality of normality/abnormality involves ethical, axiological, and even praxeological debates, the analysis of which does not fall within the scope of this final chapter. However, psychic normality and abnormality represent two fundamental modes of being of our ego. Thus, I will attempt to briefly examine the phenomenological aspects of the ontic and ontological appearance of normal selfhood and psychopathological manifestations.[1]

This description is also phenomenological in nature, as the phenomenon-like character of the experiential manifestation of our being lies behind the psychological, sociological, anthropological, or even hermeneutical and cultural-philosophical conceptions of selfhood and normality. Furthermore, it is phenomenological because it employs fundamental concepts such as active and passive synthesis,

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[1] In a world of intense discussion about normality, where health, convention, and harmonious togetherness obsessively recur from professional medical treatises to the pages of tabloids, the topic of this chapter is as relevant as can be. Our selfhood, which constitutes itself in the sense of normality, implies problems that are also interesting from a metaphysical point of view, as the representation of the world is also dependent on mental hygiene.

affection and self-affection, openness and closedness, as well as possibility and receptivity, applying them to various psychopathological manifestations.

7.1. The Foucauldian Theory of Normality

Contemporary philosophy is as indebted to Michel Foucault and his sociographical and historical account of illness, asylums, and the pathological, along with their social representations, as contemporary psychoanalysis has the obligation to remember its founder, Sigmund Freud. Foucault defines mental disorder in the following way: in the early stages of western civilization, illness was viewed as a specific entity and an autonomous reality; however, in the modern age, it will acquire meaning in the context of the general behavior and the dominant cultural perception related to the individual, and should be interpreted only in the context of these specific individual biographical narratives. The Foucauldian theory of normality relativizes the once fixed concept of the pathological, which has erected rigid and atemporal boundaries between normality and abnormality. Foucault calls attention to the historical aspects of illness through detailing the historicity of the clinics and the power relationships between doctors and their patients; beyond its characteristics which manifest themselves through the symptoms, mental illness cannot be treated as an autonomous entity inserted between the sanity and the absolute abnormality of the individual – instead, it counts as an abstract phenomenon which forms an organic part of individual life.

Foucault, through his sociological and historical mapping of abnormality, has definitively suspended the modern, exclusivist, and rigid conception of normality. While in Descartes' time – when medicine was in its rudimentary stages – it seemed logical to place madness in radical opposition to the reasoning of the exact sciences, the psychopathological experiences of the 18th and 19th centuries have once and for all shaken the belief that normality is solely dependent on logic, systematic and structured thinking, and the almost mechanical control of emotions. The Latin proverb "*mens sana in corpore sano*" defined our understanding of normality, reaching its peak during modernity. The question, however, remains: what do we truly mean by a healthy body and a healthy mind, given that this has undergone countless modifications throughout history? The selfhood of late modernity no longer thinks or feels according to the exclusive categories of normal and abnormal. The state of consciousness of our uncertain selfhood could be interpreted – somewhat metaphorically – as a mirror image of a self-awareness characterized by the symptoms of schizophrenia: an optimistic naivety lost, hybrid, and constantly changing in response to various challenges, and at times even displaying striking consistency and control. It would be anachronistic to align today's identity normality with any clinically developed, abstract standards of normality. In the whirlpool of our consciousness flows, the experiences that structure the rhythm of our daily lives delineate the measures of normality for us.

According to the traditional approach to abnormality, illness represents an internal distortion of the personality, a

system loss of the components, and the gradual alteration of these components can only be maintained within a structured self. The great psychopathological categories of the turn of the century (psychoses, neuroses, schizoid symptoms) are discussed within the framework of the dysfunctional character of a supposedly unified personality. The more rigorously we adhere to the conception of the unity of human nature, the more difficult it is to integrate in it the specifics of illness, and the greater the role of the specific attitude of the person undergoing the experience. The position of the clinically diagnosed illness is taken by the consciously considered existential experience of the suffering subject, interpreted under the pressure of the personal experience. Furthermore, we can observe interesting associations between the clinical treatment, the ill individual, and his environment: during the last century, medical science could witness the blurring of the boundaries between normality and the pathological;[2] it realized that the established diagnoses do not constitute unequivocally abnormal syndromes, but rather represent isolated manifestations of normal mechanisms, which are difficult to categorize, and influence the specific adaptation of the organism to its environment.

[2] Among the so-called "fashionable diseases" of our time is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which is often classified as an illness or a "disability". However, it can be demonstrated that numerous world-famous figures have been diagnosed with this condition, including Mozart, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, George Bernard Shaw, and Salvador Dalí. In contemporary times, this list can be extended to include ambitious business leaders who have turned their "disability" into an advantage, using it to enhance their personal productivity.

No illness can be discussed separately from the dominant diagnoses, methods of isolation, and therapeutic interventions that are characteristic of the time period.[3] In his work dedicated to the psychology of mental illness, Foucault wants to free the problem of mental pathology from the postulates of the former universalizing "meta-pathologies", and thus establishes an image of man which can be interpreted somewhat differently from the suffering one and the categories of normality. The artificial unity of the "meta-pathologies" – established between the different categories of illness – is eliminated by the historical experiences which have become irrelevant. The essential consequence of this loss of credibility is that we can remedy the case of the suffering individual only at the expense of accepting the authenticity of his existence, in the context of which we try to interpret mental dysfunctions. Ultimately, normality is the semantic function of personal biographical narratives.

The categorization system of the phenomenology of illness cannot be reduced to a few explanatory principles or superficial discussion. Rather, it has to be related to the historical fate of modern man, since it represents an organic part of the fate-altering *event of the homo psychologicus* in general. This is the only way in which the psychological discussion of historically processed abnormality can be revealed.

In this sense, the standard of normality concerning selfhood is situated within the impersonal, extra-individual

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3 See Foucault: *Boala mentală şi psihologia*, p. 17 et passim.

social and historical context. Foucault addresses these concepts by clarifying two key issues: he examines the mental dimensions of insanity and considers psychopathology as a phenomenon of civilization.

7.2. Pathology and the Experience of Reality

In the world of the ill ego, boundaries structure themselves differently, and there are other psychological laws at play. However, these are incommunicable because of the personal character of psychological experiences, discussed in association with the problem of consciousness; thus, the existential experiences of pathological selfhood can only be guessed at. Although difficult to discuss, they confront us with the extreme borders of the representation of the conscious ego.

The insane person[4] is never completely separated from the real world. He or she lives within the real world and experiences its boundaries constantly, relying to a certain extent on their objectivity. Nonetheless, his psychological integrity is constantly endangered by the chaotic experience that bursts the limits of the faith of common sense, and usually confronts him with an imaginary world that is impossible to control and manifests itself as a deceptive reality during the

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[4] We are cautious about attributing any negative, devaluative, or pejorative connotations to the concept, as it possesses ontological relevance equivalent to that of normal psychological constitutions within the quality of the individual's lived reality. In the approach to the phenomenology of illness, madness is understood as a mode of existence that offers an existential experience characterized by a specific *mode of being*.

altered state of consciousness. In this state, it would be absurd to expect objective answers to questions such as "who am I?" and "what kind of world do I inhabit?".

The mentally ill person is willing to admit his or her opposition to the external world, but under the effect of hallucinations, he or she is always inclined to ask others whether they also sense the same stimuli. It is difficult for him or her to accept that he or she is the sole perceiver of these unreal stimuli, which he or she ultimately turns into the basic components of his or her imaginary world. With a belief in their undeniable objectivity, he or she is capable of calling into question the validity of any criticism directed at them, often qualifying some sceptical and benevolent approaches as hostile. In other cases, however, he or she accepts external opinions with childish naiveté and becomes dependent on their truth.

The mental struggle with reality often leads to uncertainty regarding the boundaries of the world and existential cues, orienting the suffering individual toward an imaginary world. As a result, this creates a living environment that is mentally structured according to the strictly personal and solipsistic nature of that imaginary world. The suffering consciousness, which becomes subjectivised in this manner, entertains a unique relationship with its illness. As an existential situation related to health, any illness carries with it a specific awareness of the disease. According to psychiatrists and social scientists who study schizophrenic states, in the final stages of schizophrenia, the patient is virtually a captive of his or her subjective world. He views the once-familiar

world, which he has left behind during the process of mental disintegration, as a distant and hidden reality. His dream world superimposes itself upon the empirical sphere, bringing the consciousness of illness to the forefront. In the permanent state of illness, the undeniable certainty of this troublesome condition can become a source of heightened suffering through its awareness. As Foucault puts it, "the morbid world is never an absolute in which all reference to the normal is suppressed; on the contrary, the sick consciousness is always developed with, for itself, a double reference, either to the normal and the pathological, or to the familiar and the strange, or to the particular and the universal, or to waking and dream consciousness."[5]

Before turning to the phenomenology of ill consciousness, let us briefly examine the issues related to the mental projection of illness and its cultural and social experience.

Beyond awareness of its own state, ill consciousness also holds a certain representation of its personal, ill world. In his studies on schizophrenic states, E. Minkowski found that joyful spaces are obscured within opaque environments, as the menacing proximity of terror pushes the categories of normality into the background, causing them to appear seldom and almost at random. For the schizophrenic, the dimensions of space and time become a medium of limitless possibility. The coherent life world that provides orientation no longer exists.

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5 Foucault: op. cit., p. 57.

Regarding the space of the schizophrenic, it is challenging to speak of measurable distances, as the mentally ill person places imaginary events and sounds at random points in space, without any particular logic. Space loses its coherence, and physical objects can be found virtually anywhere; the principles of physical structuring are replaced by the fantastic, illusory reality of the mentally ill person, which is prone to manipulation. In other cases, space becomes insular and rigid. The objects within it lose their functionality, their "readiness-to-hand", as the orientation based on mutually recognized semantic cues is eliminated. The semantic and physical degradation of the world also involves the destructuring of the normativity of the social sphere.

In the future, anything is possible; what borders on the fantastic from the viewpoint of common logic becomes natural, intimate, and even desirable within the world of the mentally ill person. Time is not projected; it does not flow and loses its continuity based on the divisions of past, present, and future. The past becomes a compressed medium of excruciating memories, while the future appears hopeless and devoid of perspective, falling victim to the expanding and assimilating tendency of the morbid past.

Few people can imagine that we can find an intuitive and speculative approach to schizophrenic experiences many years before the clinical diagnosis of this state as an illness. E.g., L. Binswanger points out a particular kind of incoherence in our temporal experiences, which are lived through as a

Heraclitean flow.[6] Even in normal thought, there is a certain inclination toward self-enclosure, which, especially in introspective moments, leads to the circular self-structuring of consciousness, unsettling the coherence of our self-awareness. The continuity of the ego can become the victim of a dangerously widening egocentrism, projecting our selfhood, which has been removed from the temporal continuum, into a temporal medium alien to measurable time. In this context, it is worth considering the time- and self-constituting effects of mystical experiences, which can be regarded as mental illness from a rigorously clinical perspective.

7.3. The Self-Image of the Schizophrenic Individual in Our Schizoid Culture

The temporality of the schizophrenic is fundamentally unaware of a peaceful present endowed with any extension.[7] The unstructured experience of temporality lacks a true present. Time, as it is experienced, becomes a victim of chaotic experiences that are impossible to structure logically. Ludwig Binswanger uses the term *Ideenflucht* to describe the chaos of temporality generated by manic experiences. This segmented experience of time is incapable of constructing a healthy relationship with the past and the future; it turns inward and

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6 Binswanger: *L'appréhension heraclitéenne de l'homme.*

7 The quality of the schizophrenic experience is debatable. The literature lacks a unified conception. While clinical interpretations dispute the possibility of the patient's present experience, postmodern evaluations that characterize our culture as "schizophrenic" suggest that selfhood, subordinated to consumer society, exists in an eternal present.

focuses on immediate moments, proceeding either through leaps or by repetition. We can observe the "slip of ideas" at the forefront of this unstructured experience of temporality, which reaches its apex in uncontrolled repetitions and contradictory, absurd associations. The segmented temporality of the schizophrenic individual is unpredictable, unfolding in the terrible proximity of the threat of passing away; it is divided between the disintegrating temporality of anxiety and experiences of madness that are devoid of content, ecstatic, and open themselves up toward eternity.

From a certain perspective, it is a conceptual contradiction to speak of a schizophrenic consciousness. While it is the ego that is in the schizophrenic state, unified human existence ceases to exist. In the case of melancholic mystical experiences, the situation is quite the opposite: the depressing certainty of the ego is absorbed into Being. In instances of heightened affective experiences, the suspended consciousness of the self is associated with a fortunate loss of ego, which can occasionally verge on the border of self-knowledge. However, since the subject is threatened by a veritable loss of existence, the sick consciousness cannot "take possession of itself" in a durable manner. The mentally ill person becomes an ontologically emptied, rigid subject and sinks into his own uncontrollable subjectivism, with his ego dissolved. He vividly experiences the moral and existential crisis stemming from his internal disunion, which he perceives as a punishment of fate, and senses that he is incapable of leaving behind the temporality of the painful experience of existence.

At certain points, the self-contained nature of the schizophrenic state shows a formal kinship with the existential experiences of the solipsistic metaphysician. Both are characterized by a heightened individual experience of reality. The main difference is that the solipsistic thinker consciously adopts the thesis "I absolutely exist, and the world ceases with me" (which is sometimes merely a working hypothesis) in order to prove a more encompassing concept. In contrast, the ego-centeredness of the sick consciousness is the result of cognitive privation and can never represent a philosophical attitude, although it can be evaluated philosophically in certain respects.

It is almost impossible to paint a coherent picture of the schizophrenic's psychological profile. The elevation of incoherent, changing, and chaotic experiences, which contain opposing elements, to the level of irrefutable ideas leads to a syndrome that can also characterize certain cultural manifestations. It is no wonder that theorists who have comprehensively addressed schizophrenic experiences have noted the immanent nature of this illness in relation to the concreteness of things within the world. To put it more simply, the comprehensive analysis of schizophrenia also entails an axiological, cultural-critical, and phenomenological examination of our current cultural state.

It would be absurd to hypothesize that the sick consciousness intentionally structures and categorizes its lifeworld while projecting its schizophrenic representational world, in which it is imprisoned. At the same time, it would

also be incorrect to assume that the state of the schizophrenic is a consciously chosen mode of existence aimed at escaping the constraining conditions of the external world. This state becomes dominant when the individual perceives his own ego as a stranger. A remark from Heidegger's *Question Concerning Technology* reflects a typical cultural assessment of the regrettable schizophrenia of our society: "precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself". Foucault's interpretation aligns closely with this idea; when we are unable to dominate our communication tools and social relationships, when we cannot recognize the human dimension of our efforts or see the redeeming result of our work – i.e., when we perceive ourselves as mere toys in the play of power relations – we become the gradually devoured victims of a schizophrenic world.[8] The selfhood that exists in an alien medium discovers its only possibility for existential protection in flight into a personal universe devoid of objective cues.

[8] "Since the early Middle Ages, the madman has been someone whose words cannot participate in the social discourse in the same way as others'. At times, his words are considered null, devoid of truth or significance, since legally he cannot authenticate actions or contracts, and he cannot even fulfil the transubstantiation in the sacrament of the Mass, as he is incapable of transforming bread into flesh. However, it also happens that, in contrast, special powers are attributed to him – such as the ability to speak hidden truths, to know the future, or to see, in his simplicity, what others' wisdom is unable to perceive." Foucault: *A diskurzus rendje*.

7.4. The Cultural Dimension of Mental Illness

In time, the conception that emphatically promotes the idea of the cultural dimension of illness as the specific meaningfulness of abnormality has become established within the sociological and psychopathological scholarly literature. According to this view, illness does not have an autonomous reality; it can only manifest its abnormal character within a cultural medium that is inclined to qualify the symptoms as pathological.

The evolutionist idea that manifestations differing from "the majority" are considered unhealthy within a certain society and hint at decadent social phenomena, or, on the contrary, are the harbingers of a developing culture, began to gain ground with the sociology of Émile Durkheim. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he argues that a social fact can be considered normal for a specific type of society when it appears in the average community of that society during a particular developmental phase. This perspective emphasizes that the classification of normality is contingent upon the societal context and its evolutionary stage.

Considering the value systems of different cultures, we can observe that every culture interprets illness and abnormality based on the generally accepted anthropological model. The dominant anthropological paradigms of the time period limit our view of the normality of our selfhood. What is considered abnormal in certain historical contexts carries an exceptional status and function in some primitive communities. For instance, a person who has visions can be treated as a schizophrenic or an epileptic within Western

culture, while according to the paradigms of interpretation prevalent in other civilizations, he could be regarded as a visionary or a healing shaman.

Before the 19th century, the categorical conception of illness had not yet developed; thus, people had a polymorphous experience of madness. Intolerable madness, which demands isolation and treatment, only appears in the discourse of the 18th century. As Foucault repeatedly emphasizes, the emergence of dangerous, institutionalized abnormality coincides with the appearance and development of suppressive penal systems. In such a developmental context, it is questionable what percentage of illnesses are actually pathological phenomena and to what extent the healing institutions have contributed – and still contribute – to the worsening of medical conditions: whether they offer real diagnoses while maintaining their objectivity along with their position of power. However, these issues should be discussed in a separate study.

7.5. The Metaphysical Re-Evaluation of Abnormality

The disquieting problem of abnormality, interpreted as a mode of being, always resurfaces in the history of metaphysical thought as a prominent topic. From Erasmus and his parody, *The Praise of Folly*, to the evaluations of Schopenhauer, Goethe, and Nietzsche, madness is viewed as a fundamental manifestation of personality – a mood that suffuses the whole of existence and culminates in a specific experience of being. The metaphysics of folly – if such a thing

exists – represents a unique chapter in the history of ideas, and it can be discussed with a certain autonomy in relation to better-known philosophical tropes and paradigms, as it complements and highlights established conceptions of humanity.

Focusing on the metaphysical aspects of the sick state of consciousness, I will highlight certain characteristics of the individual quality of existence that deviate from the normal. This allows us to reinterpret the everyday conception of normal (healthy) selfhood while also pointing out its gaps.

We can derive the metaphysics of abnormality from the assumption that psychological abnormality is never sufficient in itself to explain mental illness, as it carries meanings that extend beyond the directly observable symptoms and are explicitly culture-dependent. Abnormality, as a deviation, can only be classified as such within the context of the axiological insights of a specific cultural framework, as perceived by public opinion. On the other hand, considering the intolerant and condemning nature of the rhetoric surrounding mental disorders, we must conclude that the dominant views on abnormality permeate the entirety of Western civilization, providing an accurate reflection of the psychological apperception of specific historical selfhood. With some exaggeration, one might even assert that our understanding of normal selfhood is reached through the mirrored encounter with the abnormal or exceptional otherness.

First, we begin with the hypothesis that, from both a metaphysical and cultural perspective, the complete separation of psychological normality from abnormality

creates an unrealistic image of humanity. This separation can exist, at best, within a naïve, everyday outlook on life or within abstract axiological reasoning. However, concrete human existence is far from such exclusive disjunctions; we cannot structure our daily lives according to the rigid categories of normality and abnormality, as we are inherently changeable and unpredictable, often reacting in surprising ways even to ourselves. The characteristics of abnormality are very much present in the healthy ego, as most individuals deemed insane are also capable of behaving according to societal norms. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine our prevailing social conception of normality.[9]

In the following paragraphs, we will examine the observations of Constantin Enăchescu from his works *Fenomenologia nebuniei* ("The Phenomenology of Madness") and *Homo demens: O redefinire a nebuniei* ("Homo Demens: A Redefinition of Madness"), which are pertinent to the phenomenology of abnormal selfhood. I will carefully avoid making any evaluations regarding insanity; the phenomenology of abnormality does not seek to evaluate but rather views abnormality as a possible mode of existence

[9] We consider a phenomenon normal when we observe that the majority holds a certain perception of it, and we deem an action normal when we see that it fits within the alienating frameworks of social normativity. The concept of "normal" has gradually become normative, legally fixed, and sanctioned by law. It no longer aligns with the individuality of the feeling and thinking person, but rather with normativity, which asserts itself with the arrogance of objectivity, thereby postponing the essential originality of our selfhood. This selfhood, however, cannot unfold under the command of law; yet, the rehabilitation of abnormality at such a level carefully avoids even the appearance of anarchy.

through a descriptive approach to various psychological stances. To encapsulate my perspective on abnormality, I quote L. Binswanger: “What we have to understand is not the structure of madness, but rather the nature of the madman, the structure of his new type of being-in-the-world.”[10]

The importance of the phenomenology of madness lies in the conviction that understanding psychological abnormality can provide insight into the realm of Selfhood. Anomalies illuminate hidden aspects of our identity and the potentials of our personality. Beyond their manifestations, madness, viewed as a phenomenon in its entirety, represents a particular mode of existence that encapsulates the dual possibilities of our being: we can exist in a healthy, normal state, affirming the challenges of life, yet we must acknowledge that the mode of existence characterized by negation and the involuntary endurance of disintegration, lack, and lethargy is also intrinsic to humanity. Normality and abnormality are equally possible, and their inherent aspects are integral to our human experience, as they express the psychological boundaries that can potentially affect anyone.[11]

Thus, the duality of normality and abnormality is not exclusive, and the relationship between these two dimensions does not imply debate or consensus. Instead, it validates them as complementary modes of existence, following “the logic of complementary duality.”[12] In my reasoning, the conflict

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[10] Apud Enăchescu: *Homo demens*, p. 7.

[11] In this context, we need only consider Freud’s assertion that the predominance of the life or death instinct can bring socially dangerous manifestations to the surface in anyone.

[12] See Enăchescu: *Fenomenologia nebuniei*, p. 27.

between the healthy and the pathological does not signify a struggle between two separate categories; rather, it represents an existential experience activated in everyone, influenced by their individual challenges, and manifesting in varying configurations for each person.

In our psychological dimensions, both affirmation and negation are equally valid basic forms of expression, each manifesting different possibilities of being. Phenomenology focuses solely on beingness, describing the existential structure of the abnormal mode of existence relevant to our topic. This abnormal mode, which negates established relationships within the logic of the ontology of negativity and contradicts or diverges from the general processes of the world in its reactions, introduces another level of human existence. It replaces the discourse and order characteristic of normality with pathological stereotypes.

Both pathological and healthy psychological dispositions are underpinned by the same fundamental human nature, so both modes of attunement and reality experience are based on the same constitutive elements of personality. The essential difference can be found in the perspectives of common sense: normal reasoning completely rejects the entirety of the mad person's way of being, as it is incapable of integrating the mode of denial into its more or less normative lifeworld. It regards this as a degraded manifestation of human existence that compromises the normativity provided by nature.

Primarily, the insane individual subverts the nature-given rules of their internal reality, and secondarily, they risk an ontological rupture between their ego and reality by

negating the normativity of the external world. The mad selfhood exists within a negated, irrational world. The sick consciousness perceives the world as distant and foreign, even though it is not devoid of a world (one might even argue that the insane person possesses an excessive world). This occurs as common sense constructs an exclusively personal reality parallel to the negation of all spheres of existence that are structured as unquestionable givens. The world of the insane individual is a mentally constructed realm of representations that both follows and reflects the visions and seriousness of their illness. Its unreality arises from the replacement of a unitary ontological – or, in more contemporary terminology, physical – structure with exclusively mental formations. After all, everyone has a world.

In a psychiatric approach, madness can be grasped through its apparent disorder, chaotic mode of existence, and inability to embrace conventions. However, it is questionable what self-image the sick selfhood possesses and whether it is even aware of its condition. It seems that it is not, as the individual has lost the ability to comprehend normality, rendering them incapable of understanding what a normal state is. The mad individual's self-awareness can only result from the personal experience of their altered state of being

Here, however, the question arises as to how and to what extent we, the "normals",[13] can understand abnormality. Perhaps the most important philosophical question regarding

[13] It is a strange thing to confidently regard ourselves as normal simply because, thanks to our abstract intellectual competence, we can see ourselves in a mirror and distinguish our state from abnormal manifestations.

madness is whether an epistemology of it is even possible.[14] One might argue that it is possible, simply based on observed and heard reactions.[15] However, what guarantees the semiotic clarity of the signs that manifest, and the objectivity of the medical interpretation of symptoms? Are we not allowing our personal prejudices against abnormalities to come into play? How can we be sure that our subconscious does not deceive us when evaluating pathological changes, projecting our own torments, obsessions, and repressed emotions onto the "condition" of the diagnosed individual, as articulated in a medical report? In discussing Foucault's theory of disease, we noted that mental normality is more a function of cultural than scientific expectations, and a victim of the power plays of different social statuses.[16] In relation to the phenomenology of deceptive phenomena, we can also think of Heidegger's concept of the phenomenon, which both reveals and conceals certain aspects. Therefore, based on our ingrained judgmental attitude, we cannot form a definitive picture of abnormality, even while possessing the ability to distinguish between normality and abnormality.

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[14] See Campbell: *Schizophrenia, the space of reasons, and thinking as a motor process*, p. 610.

[15] See Enăchescu: *Homo demens*, p. 113–125.

[16] In his book on the history of asylums, Foucault cites a thought-provoking case regarding the connection between (perceived) illness and abuses of power: in a 19th-century French sanatorium, the attending physician extorted a (false) confession acknowledging madness from the patient under cold showers in order to issue a negative diagnosis about the patient's condition each week, thereby keeping the patient captive within the institution. This serves as a valuable example of the vulnerability of historical values to power relations.

While our normal self defines its identity through a qualitative distinction from the pathological, in the world of the "madman", there is no alternative. The madman knows no other mode of existence because he embodies a denied, altered form of human life, which, if he were to deny it, would render him normal. However, his illness obstructs the negations that would require self-awareness and self-criticism. Therefore, it is questionable whether we can speak of the madman's selfhood, given that he lacks the ability to problematize his state of being and vegetates in a hollow, one-dimensional existential captivity. The answer is undoubtedly negative, as the constant sense of negativity cannot yield a coherent identity.

The mode of existence of the madman can be considered a pure subjectivism characterized by total negativity, a radical denial of conventionality and normativity. The most striking manifestations of various solipsistic or Protagorean subjective assertions are found in the insane. They exist in themselves, and – at least within their autistic enclosure – everything else is invalid. Their feelings of existence are absolutely valid, without contradiction, alternative, or denial. As previously emphasized, it is impossible to deny a mode of existence characterized by negation, as a double denial equivalent to affirmation would lead to the dissolution of the abnormal state. If this were to happen, it would establish the madman's self-healing capacity, which would not only contradict the essence of madness but would also place the madman directly in the light of normality.

It is likely worth reconsidering the abnormality understood as radical denial from an existential perspective.

The abnormal mode of existence is primarily an existential phenomenon: an existence that disregards the constraints of convention can be interpreted as a breakthrough into boundlessness. Now, the question arises as to whether its boundlessness carries a transcendent quality. We cannot think of "madness" as a transcendent element that projects beyond the empirical self, since authentic transcendence confronts us with our most profound possibilities of being, thereby representing the event of the concretization of my selfhood. In contrast, the mad state suppresses the potential of the spiritual reality that enriches my essence; if I were to enter it, I could free myself from the pathological, dominating anxiety as well. Furthermore, the experiences of the pathological selfhood can hardly be regarded as the result of free choice.

The unconscious and unintentional self-denial entails a repudiation of the altered mode of existence by the world. An existence that rejects normality embodies an inevitable denial of the self-interpreted naturalness unfolding under the banner of conventionality. In this symmetrical, mirror-like correlational denial, the denying individual, rejected by the world, confronts the existential drama of worldlessness. They step out of the life-world accepted by all of us and immerse themselves in the deceptive subjectivity of their imagined self. Thus, they replace objective reality with the extreme intimacy of subjectivity.

It is worth considering the horizons and possibilities of subjectivity experienced by a healthy self in light of the autist

symptoms of a self-enclosed mode of existence.[17] Autistic self-isolation essentially signifies a form of openness to oneself. The affected subject cannot perceive the absolutisation of their psychological isolation as a form of psychological determinism because it somewhat converges with the egoistic narcissism inherent in human nature. In such cases, we no longer deal with limitations imposed by the world upon the ego. Rather, we can speak of barriers raised by the denying self against conventionality, rather than the symbolic horizons of a negated reality that is perceived as a prison yet simultaneously denied.

The autist individual's alienation from the world and denial of reality can be interpreted as rebellious, denying, identity-seeking gestures of the normal ego. Alienation can be understood as a rupture in the vital connection to reality, culminating in an unnatural, pathological self-enclosure. Such an ontological turn has far-reaching implications for identity. Pathological self-isolation leads to extreme polarization within the individual's psyche. The autistic attitude results in a global change in personality, isolating the suffering subject from both the exteriority of the outside world and the proximity of their own selfhood, projecting the victim into a seemingly metaphysical dimension. However, this constitutes a fatal, hopeless enclosure that lacks any transcendent possibilities. As a result of the ontological rupture occurring in the existence of

[17] A phenomenological overview of the autistic experience can provide deeper insights into the intimacy of personhood. Once again, we can see that our everyday self can be successfully interpreted – applying the logic of distinction – by referring to this extraordinary anthropological phenomenon.

a self-isolated individual, the suffering subject postpones the factors that could form alternatives to their hermetically sealed subjectivity.

The abnormal mode of existence unfolds in the form of absolute interiority. Its duration is segmented in terms of a different rhythm and significance. This inner duration encompasses episodes of life experiences that are circular in nature, characteristic of autistic enclosure, originating from and returning to itself. Meanwhile, it remains trapped in a constant present, with the deceptive impression of time having come to a standstill, postponing the actual segmentation of the past, present, and future moments.

Isolation carries significant axiological implications. In this context, it is important to revisit the relationship between mad consciousness and the world it denies: the abnormal consciousness negates the world, while the world, in turn, rejects folly through stigmatizing categories such as "unmanageable", "not belonging to us", and "dangerous". Consequently, the rejected, abnormal self becomes increasingly inclined toward isolation, further emphasizing its subjective interiority. An absolutized personal world develops, allowing the individual to exist almost undisturbed, both with and for themselves. In this process of denial, the ontologically impoverished external world is supplanted by an intimately enriching sphere. Over time, various transpersonal experiences become habitual, alongside dreams that substitute for real experiences, depersonalization, and transitivity.[18]

[18] Intensely unusual experiences – beyond the suspicion of madness – have sometimes proven philosophically fruitful: Plotinus's mystical experiences

Both closure and isolation, as existential characteristics, cannot be understood as mere indifferent loneliness or as personal denial of communal values; rather, they constitute a quality of existence that defines the interconnectedness of life. In terms of its ontological implications, the radical enclosure manifests in the dissolution of the social bonds that connect the individual to the world. As such, it carries existential significance and should not be viewed merely as solitude. It expresses the individual's most radical affirmative/denying stance toward the world, effectively granting them a place within the observable horizons of reality. In this sense, it evolves into a phenomenon that is more than just an illness; it bears cultural connotations and consequences.

In individuals with altered reality consciousness, we can observe a strange dichotomy between external possibilities and the subjective, internal world, as the withdrawn ego is incapable of responding to the challenges posed by the external dimension. The axiological tension that exists between the external and internal aspects of reality forces the mad individual into a schizophrenic opposition, an aporetic tension, whereby they become susceptible to a constant feeling of threat from uncertainty, doubt, and suspicion.[19]

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and Nietzsche's thoughts on eternal recurrence, which emerged while contemplating the distance on the cliffs of Sils-Maria, eventually evolved into metaphysical principles.

[19] In Kierkegaard's philosophy, according to the law of the three stages, the transition from the lower to the higher stage is an existential event that results from the denial of existential uncertainty. However, while the self-conscious subject transitioning from the aesthetic state to the ethical one is

This unhappy state of being is also reflected in the anomalous dialectic of a threatened consciousness that cannot control its own sense of threat. Its heightened egocentric experiences lead to bizarre reasoning. It has questions and intuitively senses its existential insecurity, yet it remains completely helpless in the realm of informative and validating responses.[20] In his *Introduction to Philosophy*, Karl Jaspers highlights the philosophical value of the restless questioning that arises from a disturbed consciousness – at least from a formal perspective: "Spontaneous philosophizing occurs not only among children but also among the insane. Occasionally, it seems as if the general obscurity lifts before them, and profound truths emerge. The onset of certain mental disorders can indeed be inferred from these striking metaphysical revelations, although they often take the form of expressions from which it is difficult to extract meaning [...]. Yet, these spirit-filled revelations hardly evoke the sense that the obscurity in which we live our daily lives has been pierced [...]. There is a profound truth in the idea that children and the mad speak the truth."[21]

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free and capable of decision-making, the ontologically closed madman cannot have his hedonism constrained by an assumed ethical or religious state.

20 The incessant – mostly unanswered – metaphysical questions and the naive, childlike curiosity are common in the reasoning of the mentally ill, and in a certain sense, they manifest within such modes of thinking in their speculative radicality. While for the healthy adult consciousness, questions concerning the foundations of existence may seem absurd, for abnormal individuals, they represent the theoretical consequences of the experienced peculiarity of a denied ontological order.

21 Jaspers: *Bevezetés a filozófiába*, p. 10.

Considering the above observations, we can position abnormality within a more adequate metaphysical context, reflecting on its relevance to our understanding of selfhood. Madness – and particularly the "invention" of its cultural concept – was not primarily intended to illuminate the essence of pathology from the outset of this inquiry but rather to clarify the dimensions of conventionally accepted normality. Methodological errors regarding this issue stem from the misconception that it is advisable to understand madness from the perspective of normality, delineating and distinguishing it from that; however, the opposite is true: the vast uncertainty of the sphere of normality should be approached through the analysis of deviation. Normal selfhood comprehends its possibilities beginning with abnormality as an ontological and psychological otherness. Such an interpretation based on comparison must, of course, begin with the assumption that the semantics and functionality of mental illness, imbued with clinical connotations, acquire a cultural surplus that enriches the concept of madness. This concept does not completely detach itself from the realm of mental disorders but rather aids in interpreting anthropological phenomena that are inaccessible through our everyday logic, situating them in an explanatory relationship relative to these disorders.

While the reality experience of normality, aligned with objectivity, is expressed in *forms*, the logic of folly is represented by *symbols*. Normality is characterized by so-called *morphemes*, while folly is defined by *semantemes*. At the level of symbolic experiences, we can speak of prophetic, tragic, passionate, adventurous, violent, or comedic forms of

madness, depending on the prevailing significance of the meaning.[22]

All of these possible hypostatisations of madness symbolize not only specific pathological manifestations but also prototypical forms of the spiritual fate of humanity as such. For example, in the ancient approach to folly, the fool is the protagonist of tragedies, and their madness is seen as divine punishment. The historically transmitted image of folly is inseparable from the idea of inevitable, punitive fatalism.

The psychopathological inflection of normal selfhood does not stray far from the more conventionally thematic treatment of selfhood – considered phenomenologically. Beyond numerous scientifically valuable assertions, the philosophy of mental normality also addresses the possible existence of a freely deciding and acting ego within the world.

7.6. The Dialectic of Alienation

The category of "alienation" proves to be an epiphenomenon in the history of philosophy, as it does not constitute an autonomous subject of speculative discourse but rather appears as a loosely defined technical term within independent philosophical systems. It is mentioned in different contexts: outside traditional metaphysical frameworks, it is often discussed in literary, art historical, and, nowadays, psychosocial contexts when referring to individual alienation.

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22 Enăchescu: *Homo demens*, p. 148.

The question of alienation is a metaphysical one: it touches upon the essence of selfhood. We cannot speak of alienation without clarifying "who" it is that becomes alienated; how can we define their "essence", if such a thing exists; and through the process of alienation, "who" will emerge from it?

The last two centuries can indeed be described as a history of alienation. Discussions around individual alienation have arisen in the context of societies displaced from agrarian worlds, forced into the routines of industrialization (Weber, Durkheim), the capitalist relationship between employer and employee (Marx), and later concerns regarding the dominance of technology, as well as the precariousness of the human-nature relationship (Heidegger). Additionally, there has been a focus on addressing the other not through an ethics of allowing to be, but rather through an objectifying relationship (Lévinas, Buber).

We have repeatedly applied the category of alienation to the state of atypical individuals who fall outside the sanctified boundaries of normality, such as those labelled as "mad" or "feeble-minded". This raises legitimate questions. Why do we consider the abnormal state of consciousness as an alienated form of conventional social consciousness? Why is the inner world of the "feeble-minded" designated as an alienated state? To what extent does an autistic disposition reflect social alienation? In our consumer society, the individual increasingly experiences identity disorders triggered by endless consumption, the search for novelty, and the identification with social pseudo-values. These factors significantly challenge the continuity, self-identity, and

internal coherence of the self. In this interpretation, one might argue that an incoherent self is likely an existence that has become alienated from itself.

By referring these questions to the phenomenological constitution of our selfhood, we can observe how our belief in a unified identity embedded in social normality begins to waver. In this context, alienation signifies that we are no longer precisely who we once were: due to external influences that feel alien and often independent of us, we seem to respond differently than we did before, and our feelings and thoughts hardly characterize us anymore.

Alienation can be understood as a gradual process that is difficult to verify and is mostly grasped in terms of its outcomes. In every case, the object of alienation is our "inner self". This interpretation is based on the presumption that there exists an unalienated inner core that transforms into something else through the process of alienation. As a result of this process, another selfhood emerges before our self-awareness, which is a consequence of alienation. In this context, the "alien" self temporarily or permanently displaces the "familiar" self. However, we can engage in interesting philosophical speculation by relating alienation to the innate selfhood we are born with. After all, every change can also be seen as a form of alienation if we accept that "existence precedes essence" in the case of human beings. Such an inquiry would require an evaluation of fundamental human values, the coherence of human existence, and the consistency of social processes. Since alienation is always a form of "detachment" from something, both the cause of alienation and the essence of what the individual is becoming alienated

from must be the subject of prior assessment. Furthermore, alienation only constitutes a psychosocial problem to the extent that we clarify what exactly individuals are becoming alienated *from*.

Identifying the "what from" of alienation is crucial because, as numerous examples from modernity demonstrate, masses of people become alienated from themselves without being aware of it, or without the process disturbing them at all.[23] Unable to reassess their state of existence, they practice a mode of being that relies on unfounded and scattered identities – akin to the Heideggerian *das Man* – exhibiting a careless and imitation-based existence that uses "borrowed" identities as costumes. For them, alienation has become a form of normality. This highlights that "alienation" is a particularly philosophical category that sees the process's "what from" in the detachment from the values of humanity, ethics, religion, and social normativity. The result is a fractured selfhood that has lost its connection to its "roots".

7.7. The Phenomenological Revaluation of Schizophrenia

At the beginning, I mentioned that psychological normality and abnormality constitute two fundamental modes of our being, and in this way, I will attempt a brief analysis

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[23] Some people even seem to take pleasure in their "alienated" state. The more intensely individuals identify with the alienating factors, the more inclined they become to regard their state as natural and healthy. By identifying with other similarly alienated individuals, they present their alienation as a virtue based on quantitative criteria.

concerning the phenomenological aspects of the ontic and ontological manifestations of normal selfhood and psychopathological phenomena. It is precisely the analysis of the concept of alienation that has enabled the examination of madness not only as a phenomenon reflecting our experiential identity but also to transition from psychological, sociological, anthropological, or even hermeneutical and cultural philosophical concepts to the aforementioned Husserlian and Heideggerian pairs of concepts, applying them to various psychopathological manifestations.

From a phenomenological perspective, any "self-positioning" that includes some level of rupture between the ego and the alter ego, the world and consciousness, or one's past and present can be considered a schizophrenic identity. Whether these schisms are natural, constitute the ontic structure of our being, or may take on a configuration that is "preserved in a superior state of consciousness" while being "negated" during self-understanding – these are questions that cannot be addressed in detail here. For the purposes of this discussion, what is relevant is that both existence and consciousness possess a "dual openness", which is characterized by both "poietic" and "pathetic" qualities.

Considering these connections, the phenomenological definition of schizophrenia also reveals a duality. In the first interpretation, schizophrenia is seen as a reflection of a secondary rupture, differentiation, or alienation that arises within the active process of consciousness (*nous poietikos*) and within the ontic-ontological endurance of existence. Psychological, anthropological, hermeneutical, and cultural

philosophical concepts of abnormality, as well as theories of alienation, stem from this non-thematic assumption. In contrast, the second interpretation posits that schizophrenia signifies an original, primary undifferentiation, a lack of rupture, or the impossibility of alienation, which manifests in the passive process of consciousness (*nous pathetikos*) and within the proto-ontic-ontological endurance of existence.

Without delving too deeply into Husserlian and Heideggerian terminology – since my goal is merely to highlight connections relevant to this discussion – it is essential to clarify the following. Both Husserl's concept of consciousness and Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world exhibit a dual openness: one characterized by active synthesis, self-effectiveness, projection (*Entwurf*), and care (*Sorge*), and the other defined by passive synthesis, affectivity, thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), and attunement (*Stimmung*). Henri Maldiney further enriches this discussion of existential endurance in both consciousness and being-in-the-world by introducing the concepts of possibility (*possible*) and receptivity (*passible*). "Possibility" pertains to the active process of consciousness and the self-actualization of being-in-the-world, while "receptivity" refers to the passive processes of consciousness and the inherent "thrownness" of being-in-the-world.

My examination advocates for a paradigm shift in the interpretation of abnormality, particularly schizophrenia, which has thus far been understood as alienation and a rupture in the vital connection with reality. The autistically isolated and inwardly closed mode of existence undergoes an ontological fracture in its selfhood, resulting in the suffering

subject postponing the factors that could serve as alternatives to this hermetically sealed subjectivity. Consequently, the individual confronts the *existential drama of being in a world devoid of connection*. In essence, autistic self-enclosure signifies a form of openness to oneself that becomes ensnared in the labyrinth of "self-actualization" as "possibility".

We can no longer regard schizophrenia – and, more generally, abnormality – merely as a "short circuit" occurring in the active processes of consciousness or in the self-actualization of being-in-the-world. Given the characteristics of our contemporary age, we should instead seek the interpretative frameworks for schizophrenia within the processes of consciousness defined by passive synthesis and the "thrownness" of being-in-the-world. The openness of consciousness and being-in-the-world has become boundless in our time: we are overly open to everything, living in excessive proximity to all things, without any boundaries encircling our selfhood.

Baudrillard brilliantly focuses on the above thought: the spectral existence's demand for novelty, the ecstasy of communication, and the dissolution within the chains of producibility are generally characteristic of schizophrenic minds. "Perhaps we should employ metaphors belonging to the realm of pathology here. If hysteria is the pathology of the subject's excessive staging, the theatrical and operatic transformation of the body, and paranoia represents the pathology of ordering – a rigid and envious systematization of the world – then we are experiencing a new form of schizophrenia through the promiscuity of immanence and the

integration of networks into communication. This is no longer hysteria, nor strictly speaking, projection-based paranoia; rather, it is the anxiety state characteristic of schizophrenia: the excessive proximity and impure promiscuity of all things that touch, penetrate, and invade without any aura of self-defence, including the self. The schizophrenic is open to everything without volition, living amidst the greatest confusion. A victim of the world's obscenity. It is less a matter of loss of reality – which is often complained about – than it is this absolute closeness and the total immediacy of things, this excessive exposure to the world's transparency. In his hopelessness and through all these unresisting encounters, he is no longer capable of establishing the boundaries of his own being or positing himself as a mirror. He becomes a mere projecting surface, a crossroads of networks of influence."[24]

If the problem was previously understood as alienation, today it rather lies in the fact that alienation may no longer even be possible. The Wittgensteinian notion of the unspeakable – which posits that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"[25] – has transformed into a categorical imperative of what can be spoken.

In the era of communication, intrusive information has reduced both objectivity and otherness to mere elements of a network, leaving the individual facing a mental explosion. The world – more precisely, what remains of it – has degenerated into a heterogeneous outcome of mental functions. In this "absolute closeness" and "total immediacy" of the world, a

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24 Baudrillard: *Celălalt prin sine însuşi*, p. 19–20.

25 Wittgenstein: *Logikai-filozófiai értekezés*, 6. 54.

new interpretation of schizophrenia becomes understandable in terms of *fundamental non-differentiation*. We are drawing too close to everything while distancing ourselves from ourselves. There is no longer any value-bearing otherness; objectivity has ceased to exist.

These thoughts, which could rightly be accused of pessimism, are complemented by a quote: "In the past, the nightmare was to compare oneself to others and to get lost in the crowd. The nightmare of conformity, the obsession with difference. There is a need for a solution that would free us from the similarity to others. Today, the only obsession is to compare yourself solely to yourself as much as possible."[26] Our openness towards the pre-individuality of existence is no longer confined by the post-individual "selfhood" of being-in-the-world, and self-actualization, in the sense of "possibility", can no longer be considered viable.

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[26] Baudrillard: *Celălalt prin sine însuşi*, p. 31.

Conclusion

This volume has explored the modes of the "disappearance" and dissolution of the Self and selfhood in the late postmodern era. Its starting point was the logic of technology and production, which strives for supremacy and ideological dominance, a force that in our time not only threatens the prospect of an "external" ecological catastrophe but – connected to this – also the disappearance of the authenticity of subjectivity. We sought the root of the problem in the depths of the vortex of consumption, which circulates illusory notions of happiness: in the outward-directed intentionality that entices us with false transcendence, through which our existence succumbs to the allure of objects and technology.

I have referred to this situation as the state of total consumption, analysing it within its historical context and critiquing it in terms of how it impedes our human orientation toward the pursuit of happiness and opportunities for fulfilment. However, I did not approach this phenomenon from an external standpoint, but rather grounded my inquiry in the boundless, inherently insatiable sense of lack and desire that it carries within itself. In this self-reflective context, its inescapability and its inevitable attachment to us were revealed – yet, at the same time, the possibility for control also

emerged through the reflexive (applied philosophical) dimension.

It was only after I had confronted this fundamental form of unintentional self-abandonment that I could turn to the analysis of selfhood in relation to the Other. From this line of thought, however, it became evident that, in contrast to the previously discussed temptations and dangers of the "domination of objectification", genuine otherness contains the possibilities of self-awareness and, consequently, a more existentially authentic way of being.

This opened up the possibility of experiencing a different kind of relationship with the world – one that transcends the duality of subject and object and is grounded in a more intimate connection with the Other and with things. The condition for this is nothing less than a consistent rethinking of the boundaries of the self, which could lay the foundation for an *ec-static* experience of liberation from the "abstracted" isolation that detaches us from others and our world.

However, alongside the potentially idyllic experience of this attainable state, we are once again confronted – returning in a circular trajectory to our starting point – with the cost of boundary permeability, the downside of transparency: the contemporary issue of boundless openness leading to self-forgetfulness and self-loss, and the obscuring of self-awareness.

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Index

Abstract

In Search of the Self. Modalities of the Disappearing Ego in the Postmodern Period

This volume reviews late postmodern modalities of the "disappearance" of Ego and selfhood. Its starting point is the exclusivist logic of technology and production, directed at monopolizing contemporary existence and at ideological dominance. As such, this logic threatens us not only with the „external" perspective of the ecological collapse, but – closely associated with it – also with the potential disappearance of selfhood, i.e., authentic subjectivity. The roots of this problem were sought at the bottom of the vortex of consumption, marketing illusory ideals of happiness: in the externally directed intentionality that promises a pseudo-transcendence, luring our existence into the enchantment of objects and technology.

This situation was designated as the existential state of total consumption, put under critical analysis in its historicity precisely in the form in which it limits the chances of our human orientation toward happiness and self-fulfilment. Nevertheless, this phenomenon was not considered critically from an external point of view, but within a reflection based on its interpretation as an unremovable and intrinsically

unlimited lack and desire. It was this self-reflexive and also self-analytical aspect that revealed its essentially unavoidable character of being connected to our very existence – as well as the potential for its control, carried by the reflexive (applied) philosophical momentum of the interpretation.

The possibility of the analysis of selfhood in its relationship with alterity opened up only after having come to terms with this basic modality of unintentional self-abandonment. These arguments revealed, however, that – in contrast with the temptations and dangers of the "dominance of objectuality" –, actual alterity carries the very possibilities of self-reflection and thus of an existentially more authentic being in the world.

Here we discovered the chance for experiencing a different kind of relating to the Other and to the things of our world, on the other side of the subject-object duality, in a more intimate relation to the world as our home. The condition for experiencing this state consists in the coherent rethinking of the limits of our Ego, as a line of inquiry that may lead us to the experience of *ek-stastically* freeing ourselves of our abstracted isolation from others and from the world we inhabit.

Finally, along with the idyllic possibility of experiencing this existential modality, our investigations have come full circle with the consideration of the price paid for the transgression and total transparency of boundaries, as the unlimited openness also confronts us with the problem of forgetting and losing ourselves in the expansion of self-awareness.



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